

LITERATURE

Visitations from Denmark: The Prince and Pramanik

Reflections on Linguistic Identity, Literature and Society— II

THE first visit of the Prince was on the night I came back home depressed from seeing so many books at the Pustaka Mela organised by the Bangla Academy on the eve of the Eku-she February. There was never to be a book by me among those million books, alas! How all my life have I tried desperately to write one and how cruelly has fate afflicted me with this unrelenting sterility. O Right Honourable Sir! I know a lot of poets who have each published a dozen volumes before the age of twenty-five, as unrelentingly fertile as our young mothers are. It doesn't matter if the books and the children suffer from malnutrition and lack of care. In this part of the world power grows out of the barrel of a man, RHS, and not from any other organ above. I was about to go to bed with my dejection mounted on me when the Prince entered my room much vexed. There was something unusual about his gait. 'Don't stare at me like that,' he almost shouted. 'This is the neurotic way of walking Sir Laurence Olivier discovered for me in his passion for Shakespearean acting, as if having to think seriously for four hundred years were not hard enough for a single solitary soul. You can, of course, imagine, how my virile begotter washed his hands clean the moment he delivered me on the uncomfortable stage of the Globe theatre. I have never known what Mr Literary Universe wanted me to be. Consequently I have done what any sensible waif would do — submit myself to the solemn vagaries of my Shakespearean Daibabas and slip into the mould each devised for me after his own taste. And I have never made any fuss about my ever-

changing identity not even when my marxist Daibabas, exasperated by my reactionary grandeur, wanted me to rectify myself upon the Elizabethan modes of production. I must confess, though, that a particular variety of marxist outgrowth now preponderant in European thinking worries me now and then. Its steely determination to dislodge the 'I' from the unique position it has held so far seems ominously charged with the power to defeat my protean capacity for changing. In case it decided to take me up, I really wouldn't know how to play being merely an ensemble of social relations. My personal ontology is so thoroughly steeped in the 'I'! But don't think I am as completely dislodged about the West as Mr Naipaul is about his bit of the East. I still have some regard for the classist (in the sense of being class bound) honesty of the western elite, particularly for the fierce dedication and boundless pederasty with which my Daibabas, including the one who made me a little Oedipal mother-unnamiable, constructed different versions of my being. They knew what they were doing; consequently I also knew what I was expected to do. That is why I never found it so unwholesome to undergo then vicissitudes of being a child of greatness as I do now to suffer the necessity of walking neurotically before an English dreaming Bengali-medium nincompoop. This is because you don't know what you are starting at and why what you are starting at is what it is; you are, in short, ignorant and you don't think; none of you Bangladeshes ever do; not even that Daibaba of yours who, during the course of his doctoral thesis on the acceptability of the Folio edition of

my birth, happened to see Sir Laurence's neurotic production and came back home to Bangladesh jingling with the news as if he had himself invented my neurosis, forcing me for ever after to satisfy the unearned knowledge of a people who wage their tails at other people's discoveries. 'I know there's no point in fuming over things long gone by I don't enjoy it either. I am now resigned to performing erratic dimensions to my being before illegitimate audiences. Besides I have been amply paid for by the radical socio-nationalist Daibaba of my misfortune getting exquisitely liquidated in 1971 by the patriotic armed forces of Pakistan. What has got me into my present state is a thoroughly unpleasant sight this evening at your Pustaka Mela. By the way, do you know, my dear heir moribund, I quite relish the spectacle of this spurious Meena Bazar you have at the Academy every year on the eve of your great Martyrs Day. The only difference it bears with genuine Meena Bazar is that in place of the carefully conceived homespun miscellany of the leisured buxom beauties of the upper classes you have here impromptu and, for that reason, somewhat shapeless patriotism and nationalist fervour put on display by the less fortunate in terms of things money can buy. 'But the form and the spirit are the same. Both are great sources of fun. Believe me, and are meant to be so, consciously in the case of the genuine ones, unconsciously in that of the spurious one of mine and your concern. Just think of the enormously self-satisfied intellectuals in one corner reading out papers of

great nationalist import and pious pro-people phraseology they don't believe themselves, to an audience who don't believe a word of it either but pretending serious attention in friendly compliance born of similar pretensions and intellectual habits or of the greater obligation of personal acquaintance; in another corner, the group of fashionably dressed singers critically rendering patriotic Rabindra-sangeet. Nazrul Geete or pop-of-the-people songs meant to excite any passion but patriotism; in yet another and bigger corner. The nation's bookers of dubious fortune marshalling the year's publications in fancy stalls, each publication happily reducible to a chapter of moderate length by a sensible writer from any other part of the world. With imitation beltrists nibbling at cover pages between eyefuls of live glories of the Mela, and per-meating all these corners with infinite comic potential are your sedate brides of culture, your army of poets proliferating at an alarming rate, forming groups and taking positions at crucial points in the Mela, the younger and thinner ones around an older and fatter one, bearing in his extra bit of fat the unmistakable proof of an established reputation made with threats or blandishments of people controlling the nation's media, each vying with the other for the crowd's attention, their faces pale with pains of incessant poetic par-turition, their eyes hazy and mystified by the anguish and loneliness they have heard poets ought to suffer and have in fact suffered at other times and in other places; and last of all, those endless streams of men in panjabees

and women in beautiful sarrees with *lal neel sabuj* tip on their brows enjoying own smiles as well as the smiles of the crowds, proffering sanction to the great annual show of culture and receiving absolution for their acultural activities round the year. What a spectacle, dear: Never doubt I would hesitate for a moment to part with my metaphysical greatness for a couple of evening at the Academy on the eve of your Shaheed Day. It gives me such great relief from the weary stale flat and unprofitable business of being what my Daibabas all the world ever have made me out to be. Every year I make it a point to visit the Academy on this particular occasion. I do it in a holiday spirit just as I did this evening, letting the intellectuals, the singers, the poets and the crowds rub my singed inwards with secretions of the Bangla Academy comedy, when my eyes suddenly caught the title of a lankish volume in miserable getup. Do you know what the title was about? Me! O dear literary bunk incarnate. The author of that evident monstrosity has done me into Bengal! I didn't dare to take a look into it and fled from the Academy premises in mortal fright of coming up against myself disfigured beyond recognition. You know, don't you, about your practice in the field of English literary criticism. In your boundless lethargy and your inability to think for yourselves, to say nothing of your insatiable lust for easy money and easier fame, you would borrow at random from critics abroad, preferably the less well-known ones, without acknowledgement. You would then piece together your critical borrowings and pass

that bewildering barobhaja off as your own and with complete immunity in this fortunately benighted land of yours. I would not give it a damn, if it were merely a matter of literary ethics. It's not, it impinges disastrously on my already dismal career of playing to a lumpen gallery, it threatens me with complete dissolution of identity. For instance, that Shakespeare vendor must have patched up a preface to his translation which is bound to be marked by absence of any principles of translation whatsoever. He may very well have made up his mind to explain his noble endeavour and the nature of my dilemma as you are so fond of calling it. In so doing he may just as well have culled wise things told about me by my western Daibabas and pounded them up into a confounding nonentity he would henceforth lovingly call is Hamlet. Prince of Denmark. Tell me, how can I hope to be able to play being that weird assortment he is sure to have made me out to be, to generation after generation of Bangali-medium boys and girls who are going to make my acquaintance through his translation? If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, save me from an eternity of dismemberment by a fellow Bangladeshee. You will understand, RHS, that I didn't like the things the Prince said about our honourable intellectuals, our men of culture, more particularly, our learned scholars. How can I, I being daily tormented by an irrepressible desire to be taken into their fold? I remain, Sir, your most obedient servant, Irfan Pramanik

Two Poems by Nazim Mahmood

To One Who Stood by Me

From a lighthouse window in a deep sea
Are you still looking out for me.
A lantern swings like your anxious eyes
To show my vessel where it lies.
A long forgotten melody as you are
A poem, God's own daughter of Nature,
A sudden shower from a dark horizon,
In my hours of trial a brave Amazon.

The Best of Your Gifts

No beauty of Shrivasti I seek on your face
Nor a Bidisha by night I need in your hair.
For love only I run the mad race,
Come what may in life I don't care.
For your love and love and love alone —
A heavenly favour, a bliss divine,
The best of your gifts I have known
For a sip of which I ever pine.

History and Correctness

by Abul Ashraf Noor

All the sins of mankind make history
For history
Like fossils they need to be
Studied and corrected
Based on analysing substances
For the benefits of human civilization
And heritage, from time to time.

The uneasy world asks for something
Special to revise human history
Reason: 'Love with harmony' is now an urgent need
And a force much stronger
Than the barrel of the gun
My sentiment is with humanity
Singing the song of the unsung
The unknown and the unheard.

Now for divine blessings I kneel down in prayer
Seeking a spotless record of man
On earth.
As being alive to-day I owe mankind an explanation
Let my humble desire be fulfilled, oh God
For correctness in history.

Loneliness

by Rubaiyat Khan

Loneliness, is something, calm
It is to some, a light
Restless shadow
But to some, a peaceful
Glittering spring
which washes away the debris
of silvery pebbles.
To some, it is a brown robin,
Soaring in an endless
Blue sky.
Travelling in a magical world
of one's own.
Loneliness, to me, is
Another person
One who listens, never disagrees
is a faithful, loving shadow,
Who never deserts.....

Wake Up! Open Your Eyes

by Rakesh Fazal

As the ominous clouds gather
the vultures lurk in ambush.
They were kept in check for two decades
now they are eager to pounce on their prey.
The smell, of victory is driving them mad
in shameless anticipation they salivate.
This time nothing will be left to chance
they have had time to prepare the chart.
They will put the Mongols to shame
the rule of the jungle will prevail.

People of Bangladesh, wake up! open your eyes!
amongst you is there not a champion alive?
who can raise the standard and check their stride.
Wake up! let them hear your war cry.
Have you forgotten the reign of terror
that swept the land like and unholy tide?
When nobody was exempt, nothing was sacred
you were chained and transported back in time.
Wake up! don't act as if you have been hypnotised
do not let them fool you with their sweet lies.
Beware! it is the Devil in disguise.
Are you willing to give up your rights?
Don't you know that you will forfeit your pride?
Save the land, don't let them ruin your lives
People of Bangladesh, wake up! open your eyes!

Two poems by Mujib Rahman

Spirit of Lover

Nila, nothing to express
nothing to suppress
nothing to press
in the world....
Love is such leafy, luscious
Life becomes so lofty, gracious.
It is the life-like game
Wild animals too become tame.

Hey! Nila, let us roam in the grove.
Let us unfold the treasure-trove
of our colourful feelings
of our unruly dealings.

Nila, Malice and jealousy
mere soap-bubble
Love, the spirit
make joys double.
Love surpasses power and fire
Love breeds good subduing fire.

Streamless Stream

Water recedes.
Gradually the moon wanes.
Leaves drop. Soundless sound
shakes the base of existence.

Cultured mind, flowery words
transform in a hurry
in form, in meaning
and in implications....

Holding the hoary hand of Time
Zenith comes down to nadir
through the eternal revolution
of down and dusk

It's All about Dreams and Destiny

EXCUSE me my name is Sachs, could you please tell me where Anna Skodra might be? She's gone home, her class has been over sometime. I haven't got her address, can you..

She inquired how does she relate to me which was no business of her so I turned back. Next day I made sure I'd all the world's time with me. I'm in a situation where I won't be able to recognise her from her face only. Time has done its neat crafts so have we although not skillfully enough. Impatiently I was looking for a girl who from the looks won't ask me stupid questions.

Were you asking for me yesterday? Are you Anna Skodra? That's me, I'm Sachs, we were in Grade Four together in Riverview High, do you remember? Sachs.. Four.. I'm afraid I've a poor memory. It's alright I guess, after all I was no celebrity. Neither was I but anyway that was Grade Four. Yah. Why don't you drop by for some tea sometime, an ol'boy from the school is always welcome.

I didn't keep her invitation. I came as a pilgrim not as a macaroni. Waiting for the train I scribbled a note. The reason for coming back in Ringgit was a very personal one, it was you. Now that I've met you, I'm going back. I'm leaving my address with you with a forlorn hope that someday you might wake up with some old memories. Having put those lines down, I told myself, I can mop the Atlantic now if I must.

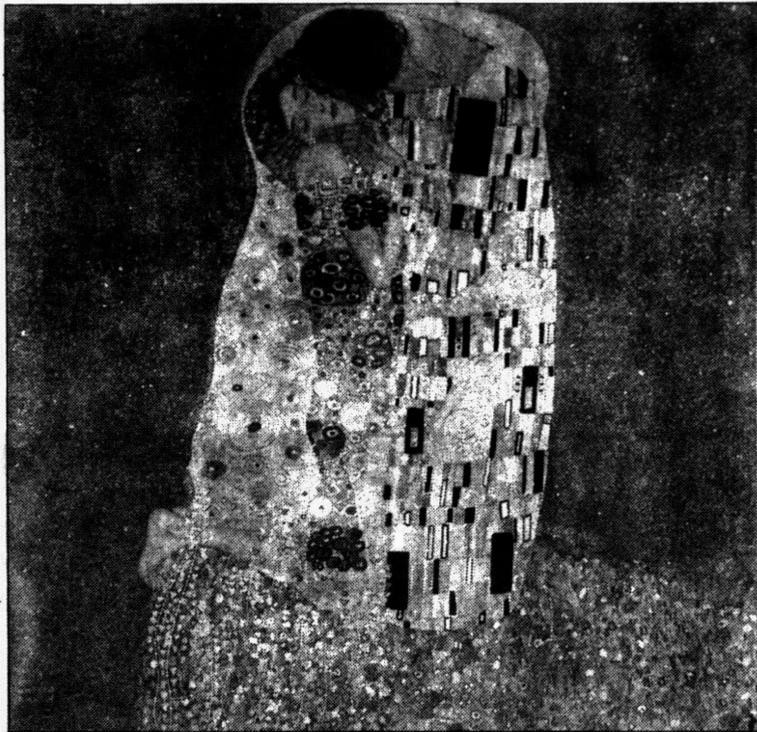
The chair facing mine on the twelfth floor of Madison Tower is Susana Achmad's. She rarely lets her eyes wander from behind her gold rimmed spectacles but when she does, everybody can see those fatally eyes. But no article of practice is she restricted from the advances of any fine young man trying his lucks. In fact many mongrels are so good at it that they sniff out invisible cooking in the books in order to check it out with "Miss Susie." I always found her cold and stiff like a chicken out of the deep fridge. Of course I'd my chances to accompany her in places of work but never did I get to the point of asking her what she was doing that evening, even when her perfume had killed me.

I live the life of a perfect bachelor. Barber's in the morning, tea at Jane's kitchen in the evening and seducing, unguarded pullets on the side. I asked Neela once, what did she think seducing meant. She tipped her head at one side and looked askew. It could mean, she did know or she didn't. Every week she has got one of these new girlish body language things. She has a painful way of having fun with me also which I dread.

One day I couldn't seem to find my wallet as I went over to say hello. A clean case of pick-pocketing I assumed. The problem was in getting back home without letting on the unwarranted, unless of course I turned up to Neela to fill in the coffers. She attached strings to it, I would've to stay for a week in exchange. An indecent proposal which bears ignominy but I kept on haggling until she settled for a night. The next day she returned the lost wallet and confessed without remorse that she slipped it out of the pocket when I got into a change of dress. She did it to teach me a lesson about what happened when somebody blindly took the other for granted. I saw a glint in her eyes that was smarter than I could get. Something inside me told me to run but a thief in Baghdad is also a thief in Belgrade so I still see her.

One hot summer day I dropped by for some cooling and our gazes met when she came out of her bath wrapped in robes, water dripping from her rich black shocks. She smiled mysteriously and said that she knew I was coming. Fat chance, I said. When the lunch was being served out she placed my seat next to hers, to press my feet under the table, for anybody concerned. I whispered that we need to talk. She made a sign of the eye which meant "spys around." After a while

A Novella by Shakib Ahsan



she came down very silently with a book in her hand and told me to pretend helping her with the study.

Don't you think I'm too old to be your friend? My mom is older than you, she is my friend. No she isn't just your friend, she's your mom, look there are a lot of things you don't understand. I can live with that, even more than you think... yesterday I talked to this guy, he lives next door, a real hunk. How old is he? About your age. Do you know what's the name of the game? He'll be the nicest guy in the world before you see his cloven hooves, much like between us. Is that thing in you peoples mind all the time? Why don't you go to your room tomorrow is my test.

Somebody was sent in my room to call me for tea. She lifted her face from the book and told me to sit. I said, I thought she won't want to see me for the rest of the day. A sign of inquiry swept over her face. I told her to call to mind what'd happened between us just after meal. She didn't remember was her flat reply. I've been trying to get myself transferred to another desk. I'm tired of the same prigs and the same yellow files. After office hours I don't take a taxi, a long mauder and a jumbo burger between the jaws is what I enjoy with lots of ketchup thrown in. One such back breaking, close of the day I saw Susana braving the crowd on her nimble feet. I ran to her with two jumbos, she was the kind of woman who thought it nice to be insisted on twice.

Next day just before closing the accounts I slipped a two-liner to her pleading her to wait at the same place. I was the only bachelor in the office who didn't mind staying after five with a sardonic smile but today was different, I said no for a reason and felt good about it. I stood over her table, she gave me a look of a girl caught cheating in a test, telling she could sabotage the whole thing at the last

minute. But she was better than that, we walked past the lurid walls and into a perfect gloaming. I bought two red balloons and held before her.

What'd I do with it? Right now just don't let it go, put in a pin if you wish afterwards. And what'd you do afterwards. Me! I'll give it to my son. Now somebody's lying. Don't you fib sometimes? No. Haven't you heard, a lie a day keeps the doctor away?

Every Friday Neela rings me. We spend an hour or two on the phone; if we don't, the whole day becomes a disaster for both of us.

You're coming tomorrow and that is that. What's the hurry about? I don't know, there is none I can talk it over with. Have you ever thought of checking out with a doctor?

I took a 15-day earned leave, a taxi, a train and didn't bother what lied next. The night was moonlit, the stars astir and I stared out like a man possessed. The old locomotive hissed into a quaint little station in the early hours. I knew we were heading south but the extra tinge in the air told me the sea couldn't be too far.

The sleepy seaside resort was hard not liking. It'd its long stretch of white sands, its band of regulars around the drinking places and native dolls who sat in their tinkler shops and smiled like any man's money. I've sent in a beautifully written letter of resignation on my second day here and also would've ignored the white lady a few more days who distracted me every morning with her posse of brutes from studiously digging the soggy shore. I was no male bug drumming up a mate song so there was no reason why I shouldn't meet this beautifully built and seemingly brilliant woman. I went over and held out my hand.

Sachs, habitual drifter, you'll get me at the beach whenever you need company. Miss?

Evans, Sicilia Evans. Pleased to meet you Ma'm. Before you go may I remind you to take a 5.4/60 shot at the sun before it's too dark, you won't hate it. The lady or should I say young Miss Evans came in the next day, not alone but with a cortege of sordidly inquisitive hangers on.

Horrible wind. What not? Talk about the attention you're getting. Don't mention it, they're not giving me any break. Is this your first time in South Asia? Yes. That explains why you didn't give a second thought before sitting by me. Am I not supposed to? No, this is no place for a girl like you. You talk like my dad. Fine, have it your way but didn't your old man tell you that holidays over here are a sure nightmare? I'm not here to make a holiday. I've come here to set up a research project. Who ever named you made a little mistake, you should've been christened Militia not Sicilia. Speaking of names, how in the world did you end up with a name like that — "Shucks"? It's Sachs. Whatever, you're having a bit of a busman's holiday I can see. Not me, I'm an escapee from the Ochlopolis. What was the charge against you?

Armed with a camera she went over and captured the frothy, uncanny and purple horizon in a few sure-fired shots. She promised to send me some if they came out as good as I canvassed.

A whole day went without the sight of her shadow. Somebody said to have seen her jeep heading out of town. I felt like a Crusoe; no books, no painkillers, nobody to talk to. All I did was ruminate the few lines I remembered from Elliot, in a cycle of earthly boredom.

Where've you been hiding? Something came up and I'd to run, nothing big, some primary tests I thought they could handle. You'll have plenty of times to drip your sorrows later but first tell me who you're missing at the moment? My family. Tell me about them. Well, I'm the only sister of five brothers, my dad moved in a ranch he bought some 15 years ago in the outback, mom said the air would do us good, and that was just about it. Did you've to come in this bog? I saw no point in branding cows and being a marine biologist it was against it, actually I was a poor hand at it. What about you, what kind of work do you do. Did you do. I worked in a buying house, now I'm quits, wasn't the pressure actually, everything I did amounted very little to me, yes, they were paying me for the bread and the circus but I felt any callow in a tie has his days, you get my point? Have you tried a change in the job? Yes, but the problem is not in the job it's in me. This time the change had better be far deeper.

We sat there lost of words, a pall of silence fell over us. Her face resting on her knees, caressed by those soft flaxen frizzles begged me to believe that she understood what I said. I asked her whether she'd do me a favour. She nodded eagerly. I told her to bring me some tablets for my headache. I didn't know I'd need them here.

That night I had a bad dream. Susana and I were in a hot air balloon, which she was trying to put a hole into. I desperately tried to stop her when she became Neela and yelled to let her go. We were losing heights and seconds before we crashed down I realised it was a dream. I woke up in cold sweats. Sachs, how are you feeling? What's wrong? Everything is wrong, you've been laid up in fever for two days. You need a doctor, I'm taking you to a hospital, do you have an address? I'm sorry I searched your bags and wallet for it but there seemed to be not a line anywhere, don't fall in to sleep let me get you in the jeep first.

The jeep roared like a great flying machine as it lashed against the surges of wind that kept come thrashing and thrashing with no respite. My consciousness came and went as bright spectrums of lights came flushing in

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