

travel tale A Kerseong Encounter

by Fakrul Alam

It was when we had left Darjeeling and were on the road to Kerseong that my wife and I met Dr K N Ganguli. We were in the rear of a Willys jeep which had been converted into a mini-bus. As in all such vehicles, there was hardly any room left to stretch inside. If you were above average in height or overweight, you were bound to jostle against the passenger on the other side at every turn of the road. Sure enough, as the jeep swerved at every turn of the road, Sue enough, as the jeep swerved at a particularly sharp bend in the road, I hunched over to the man on the other side. Embarrassed, I excused myself.

"Think hie," he said, without smiling, but with a reassuring glance that said it was all right. I looked at the man closely for the first time. He was nearly six feet tall, obviously cramped for space in that crowded jeep, fair, with what I suppose are Aryan features. He appeared to be the intense type, and the cigarette he kept on puffing without focusing on anything in particular whenever I glanced at him seemed to confirm my initial impression of a tense and driven man.

After a while, I lost interest in him and resumed the conversation I was having with my wife in Bangla about the Darjeeling part of our holiday. Inevitably, there was another sharp turn in the road as the jeep wound its way and once more I had to apologize for careening into him. "Think acheye," he said this time, half-smilingly. So he knows Bangla and wants us to know that, I thought.

Soon the jeep stopped at a wayside hotel, one of those nondescript wayside places which drivers in long busroutes seem to prefer. All of us in the jeep got down and we found ourselves once again sitting across the man I had been lurching into on the bus.

He must have been overhearing the conversation we were having in the jeep for he said to me in Bangla, "So you are from Bangladesh and are holidaying in our country?"

When I answered yes, he had a few more questions for us, the kind of questions Bangladeshis travelling in India are often asked. I answered them as politely as I could, and then we were silent for a while. Abruptly, he broke the silence: "How come people in Bangladesh are so hostile to us Indians? After all, so many of us died in 1971 for you all, so many of our bairins were widowed then?" Goodness, I told myself, we have come across a BJP type, a rabid chauvinist, and we must watch what we say. When he told me that he was a Brahmin and that his name was Dr K N Ganguli my fears about being confronted with a zealot intensified.

When the bill came, however, he was all politeness and insisted on paying for our tea and snacks, calling us his "guests." I felt compelled to be polite and to ask, "So are you holidaying like us too?" He seemed to have been all geared up for such a question for his answer came in a rush: he was on official business, and had just finished an assignment in Darjeeling; he had lived there

couldn't help thinking, what fraud!

Soon he took leave, saying that immediately after he had met his wife and little son, he would be back and would take us over to his house for dinner. When he failed to come that evening, I wasn't surprised. We concluded that we had seen the last of a man who couldn't stop making up stories about himself and was not to be relied upon for anything. But next morning, as we were having breakfast, Dr Ganguli turned up again. He excused himself for not coming the night before. The reason, he said, was that his child wasn't well. Then he offered to send us his official car so that we could spend the morning sightseeing. After that, we were to have lunch at his house.

We declined his invitation and offer of his car, wary of him and not willing to depend on him any more, but he said he would not take "no" for an answer. Kerseong was the center of his operations, and we were his guests in the city, and so a car would be on its way even though he would have to leave because of an urgent piece of business!

This time he lived up to his promise. However, the car that came was shabby Ambassador, and seemed more like a meterless taxi than a fleet car. Was Dr Ganguli paying out of his own pocket in his bid to impress us with his resources as well as his hospitality? Or did he have some ulterior motive in going out of his way to be nice to us? Our suspicions about Dr Ganguli grew even as we went around the beautiful city of Kerseong in the car he had obviously hired for us.

When our sightseeing was over, the driver took us to Dr Ganguli's flat. He lived in the first floor of the last house in dingy lane. Just as we entered it, a muscular sadhu with vermilion splashed on his forehead and a trishul in his hand rushed out theatrically. Seeing this man armed with the trident leave should have relieved us, but somehow we felt even more apprehensive about our host's intentions when we entered what should have been a drawing room but was a barren place, without even a single chair in it. Had we blundered in coming to this dead-end house and why did everything in it now appear to be so sinister looking?

"Don't worry about him," Dr Ganguli reassured us. "He works for my Department. When I am away he guards my house. On other occasions he dresses up as a sadhu and mixes with the local population to collect intelligence." Was this explanation another fabrication of his fertile imagination, a half-truth, or the truth? My wife and I looked at each other in complete confusion and some consternation.

However, as soon as we entered the bedroom, and a beautiful Punjabi woman with a little boy came in from what was obviously the kitchen, we were relieved. My wife Sangeeta and my son Abhinovo. Her father is a Brigadier-general and did you know that he was named by the President of India himself? Here we go again! thought I wearily; (more cock-and-bull stories). Nevertheless, she smiled all the time and the infant was beautiful as babies only can be, even though it was obvious that Sangeeta did not know any



in the state guest house; and he was now on his way to Kerseong on another assignment.

Was he a travelling salesman who had somehow managed a room in the state guest house then? No doubt he read my thoughts, for he now told me that he was a special agent, working for the President of India. He had just concluded sensitive negotiations with Subhas Gheising, the leader of the Gurkhas. Apparently, Gheising was now amenable to dialogue after having agitated for a separate Gurkhaland carved out of the mountainous part of West Bengal.

Oh dear, a braggart, a fake, given to tall tales, I concluded. After all, could a special agent reveal himself so readily to a foreigner like me? And could someone negotiating such a sensitive issue ride a jeep used by people travelling on a limited budget such as us?

As if wanting to forestall such skepticism in me, he said that he had to travel incognito for security reasons. It was better to travel in the anonymity of a public jeep than in a staff car, he claimed. When we were back in the jeep he inquired if we were planning to stay in Kerseong. Yes, we said, for the night and the better part of the next day, since we intended to do some sightseeing and would board the night train from Siliguri to Calcutta. Did we have a place to stay in Kerseong? He knew all the good hotels in the city and could recommend one to suit our taste. Evidently, he had supplied tiles to most of them and this was a side business. As if to prove this point, he brought out a visiting card which did not name him but announced a company manufacturing marble tiles.

Did I think there was good market for tiles in Bangladesh? This was his next question. So this explains his interest in us. I cautioned myself, he sees me as a possible business contact! However, he dropped the business angle, and switched to his literary once more. He had done a Master's in mechanical engineering from Holland and his doctorate was from Japan. He had worked in Abu Dhabi as a plant manager for a leading multinational. As soon as he had made enough, he had offered his services to his country for free, and that is why to President of India had picked him up for the nation's secret service.

And yet, a moment back this man was talking about selling tiles and had brandished a pretty impressive visiting card. I thought bemusedly! As the jeep approached Kerseong, Dr Ganguli offered to help us with accommodation once more. Almost as soon as I said I would like his help, he said "stop. Driver" and asked as to get off. But the hotel we got down at looked pricey to me, and was clearly half a mile away from the city centre.

Official fellow, I muttered to myself. To him I merely said I would like to stay closer to the city. And so we walked heavily and awkwardly up the hill, baggage in hand. I cursed myself for listening to him, a total stranger, perhaps even a con-man or a broker who probably got a commission for bringing clients to a hotel such as the one he has taken us to, while my wife stared at me as if to say, "you are such a sucker to believe such stories!" But he led me to another hotel, one that suited our budget and was obviously near the heart of the city. Making a show of his importance to the owner, he said, "remember me, I was involved in designing your hotel and its construction?" The owner, however, seemed not to remember Dr Ganguli. Once more, I

English and could only speak in Hindi.

I glanced round the room. The bed on which my wife and I sat, the chair occupied by Dr Ganguli, a table, a dressingtable, a wooden almrah, a cot, some toys, and a couple of suitcases appeared to be all the worldly possessions the Gangulis had. As on other occasions, Dr Ganguli seemed to have read my thoughts. "We have to restrict ourselves to the bare minimum of furniture since we have to travel all the time. Whenever a new trouble spot erupts, the President will order me to it, and I will have to pack and go in an instant. Sometimes they will helicopter me from Kerseong to Bagdogra and from there an Airforce plane will fly me to Delhi to meet the President. All this in a few hours!"

I tried not to look incredulous — there wasn't even a telephone in the house!

While listening to him — there wasn't much scope for conversation when Dr Ganguli was around since he would rather talk than hear what others have to say — I glanced at an airmail envelope left at an angle which someone in my sitting position was bound to notice. The name of the addressee was in capital letters: Dr A N Ganguli, Ph.D. A pathetic attempt to impress me with his credentials? I couldn't help wondering. "That letter is from the member of Parliament who chairs the parliamentary special affairs committee." And yet he adds a Ph.D after prefixing a Dr before a name! I thought with some amusement.

But there was no doubting Dr Ganguli's hospitality. His wife had cooked a sumptuous five-course lunch for us — she told me that he had gone out shopping in the morning especially for us. The two of them genuinely appeared to be going out of their way to please us.

Of course, there was a price we were paying for the lunch — we had to listen to Dr Ganguli's farago of fantastic-sounding stories. And these seemed to get wilder and wilder. He told us, for example, of his favourite past-time: writing poetry, something he had been inspired to do by Tagore, his father's close friend. He mentioned his detestation of Calcutta, and said that he had chosen to cast his lot with the people of the hills, rather than be with the enervated Bengalis of the plains. Soon it was time to go. Despite the delightful lunch and the warmth with which the Gangulis had treated us, we were anxious to get away. But Dr Ganguli insisted on taking us all the way to the bus station. As we boarded the bus, he gave me a list of "influential" people in Siliguri that we could contact if we ran into any problems in that city.

We took leave of Dr Ganguli and he disappeared from view. But as the bus began to roll out of the station, Dr Ganguli suddenly reappeared, some grapes and oranges in hand: "Something for you two to have on the way."

But was he a fraud, a man who had delusions of grandeur, a braggart, or a man who genuinely cared for his country and for visitors to it like us — after all, not only had he not harmed us, he had taken considerable trouble to make us happy in Kerseong — or was he a bit of both? It has been many years since we saw the last of Dr Ganguli, but my wife and I still haven't been able to make up our minds about him!

Fakrul Alam is professor and chairman of English at Dhaka University

interview

A Poet Speaks

by Shamsad Mortuza

THE big question today — what is more important, religion or culture? — was very much relevant when Mohammad Rafiq grew up as a teenager in the late fifties and early sixties. He belongs to a group of poets who resisted His Master's Voice, and learnt to be sensitive to all kinds of human and social issues. He is a poet who relates his experience to the whole nexus of Bengali culture. His poetry celebrates the great Bengali tradition where Buddhist philosophy meets Muslim teachings of equality. The *dohas* of Charyapada, the Vaishnava Padavalis and kirtans, the Baul songs, the love and mystic songs of the 16th c. Muslim poets — everything has its part in the making of Bengali culture.

For Mohammad Rafiq, Bengalis were never averse to the cultural influences of their conquerors. They had met the "other" by "thinking, absorbing, and creating." Bengalis, by necessity, adapted to their colonizers, but they did not adopt their European master's language for literary expression, as so many other colonized peoples have done. Rafiq finds a Vellejo or a Neruda or a Sartre or an Adorno more relevant to us than an Eliot or an Empson.

Mohammad Rafiq is a recipient of Alaol, Bangla Academy, and Jebunnessa-Mahbubullah awards. In 1993, he attended the International Writing Programme in the University of Iowa, USA.

For the last 22 years, Mohammad Rafiq is teaching English literature at the Department of English, Jahangirnagar University.

The interview took place at an abandoned — well almost deserted — house at Elephant Road. The poet has recently moved in to this house in Dhaka. "My sister has bought it, and it is yet to be renovated," the poet explained as we climbed up to the first floor. Settling down on cane sofa, Mohammad Rafiq showed me a turtle, his companion of lonely days. Classical Indian music filled the air as I placed the first question:

Samsad Mortuza (SM): How does it feel to teach literature in the classroom?

Mohammad Rafiq (MR): I enjoy it. I try to make literature meaningful in my classroom. The whole gamut of world literature looms large, and I discuss its various aspects making it meaningful in our context, in our time and space. I like to see people around me — smile and enjoy.

SM: Do you think literature can be taught in classrooms?

MR: Literature definitely cannot be taught. It can at best be recreated. Literature gets its meaning from its meeting with other culture. It is the "other" that keeps us living.

SM: These meetings are mutually influential, is suppose?

MR: Well, of course. You know, trees can be grafted. But only the sapling with vitality can strike its roots in foreign soils, and survive. It is the vitality of other literature that helps broadening our vision, our perspective. To a great extent, it helps understanding our self.

SM: You teach English literature but write in

নির্বাচিত কবিতা মোহাম্মদ রাফিকের

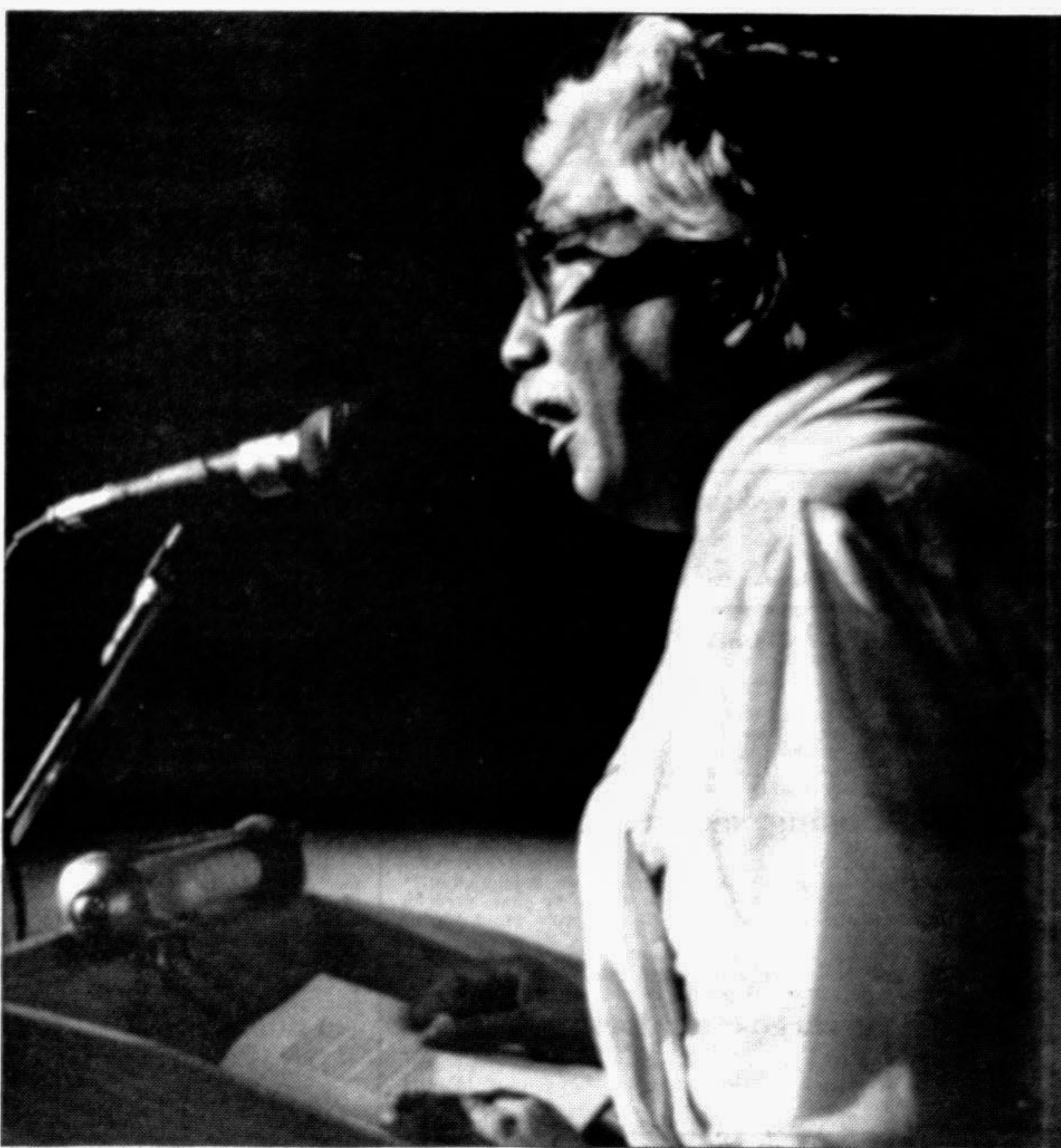


Jacket of Rafiq's selected poems published from Jakkat publishing house, Calcutta. This edition has an excellent introduction by Arun Sen.

Bangla, English seems your passport to the literary world. How do you define the position of a Bangla writer in today's world?

MR: Bangla, till today, has remained closed within Bangalees. However, there has been recent changes, marking writers from West Bengal different from the one from Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the predicament of a Bangla writer is different from that of a writer writing in English. A writer writing in America is uncertain of the response he will get in Nigeria or New Zealand. But a Bangla writer can expect almost same response from readers in both parts of Bangla.

SM: In international context?



Mohammad Rafiq: Puck or Falstaff? Ram or Ravan?

MR: Unfortunately, the world literary audience is ignorant about the rich, cultural heritage of Bangla literature. Rabindranath is a memorable exception. I feel, the world has remained poor for it has not listened to the amazing creativity of Bangla writers. Humanity cannot grow rich by remaining deaf to the voice of such a rich language and culture.

SM: About the position of Bangla literature in global context, do you think our colonial experience has got anything to do with it?

MR: As you know, Bangla has never been a colonial master. If a Bangalee prince would have ruled India, we would have a different scenario today.

On the other hand, Bengal was suddenly exposed to a colonial reality. It was totally unprepared, and in order to meet the "other" it had to wait for almost a century. As modern Bangla, writers began to develop *genre* of their own, they were certainly influenced by western ways, innovation, structure, and thought. But they did not speak the language of a Prospero. They used their own tongue to voice out. Today, we need to do the same — finding the right words to express ourselves as Bangalee, as citizen of the world.

SM: We are sharing a post colonial predicament.

MR: Well, I have my reservation about the term 'postcolonial'. The 'postcolonial' or 'colonial' or the history of migration — these are all parts of human civilization. Maybe 3000 years from today, the term will lose its meaning in a changed context.

SM: You are against compartmentalisation of history.

MR: Yes, I think we should try to understand the recent trends of literature. Bemoaning the colonial or even racial experience under a certain definition will not do any good.

SM: How do you rate yourself then? A modern or a post-modern?

MR: Really, what am I? A Puck! a Prospero! a Falstaff! a Macbeth! an Iago! an Othello! a Sade! a Ramkrishna! a Durjadhan! an Arjun! a Ram! a Ravan! a Classicist! a Romantic! a Premodern! a Modern! a Postmodern! Maybe all at once, when I get down to writing.

SM: You have just uttered one of the most visible features of contemporary writings: the crisis of the self; the crisis of identity, in particular.

MR: True, identity crisis is a significant factor in today's literature. But first of all, you need to ask whose identity you are talking about. A writer writes from his experience of oppression or negation. He attempts to overcome these problems in his writings. You can trace this crisis of an individual after the rise of bourgeoisie in Europe. The romantic revival as a response to the industrial revolution surfaced this question of the self.

But the beginning of the 20th c. saw the fall of bourgeoisie. The image of a man was totally shattered and brutalised. And someone had to put the pieces together.

SM: Who are the exponents?

MR: As an exponent, one must recall Charles Baudlaire. At the end of the 19th, trends of contemporary poetry became expressive through him, and other European poets who came after him. Verolaine, Rambau, Swinburne and Vahaeran are few of them. With the advent of 20th C, there was a wasteland in which tuberculin and

sickening hearts suffered and suffocated. Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* is a wonderful, symbolic account of the period.

SM: Are you inspired by any of these writers?

MR: Every poet in every language is my inspiration. I dream of so many writers, and unconsciously I quote so many of them that while I write I feel I am one with them.

SM: I understand that some of your poems have been anthologized internationally.

MR: My poems in English translation have been published in the USA, Mexico, Argentina, Guatemala, Israel and Poland. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut has shown its willingness to publish a selection of my works.

SM: How far have these translation been true to your text?

MR: To be candid, I personally don't believe that literature can be translated. However, the fact is we cannot do without translations. Translation is a part of human communication. So it should be done and encouraged. As for my translated works, the American translators have done an excellent job. I tell them, in words of Neruda, "Improve them if you can. Please don't repeat what I have done so miserably."

SM: What about the standard of translation in Bangladesh?

MR: It's pretty good — but not that much encouraging. We should introduce and incorporate translation courses in the Humanities Faculties. At the same time professionalism should be encouraged in this world of free economy where everything has to be achieved through "effective entrepreneurship."

SM: As a poet what do you want to accomplish?

MR: Every poet gives meaning to his experience. He wants to give language his own stamp. I don't want to be an obtruse exception.

SM: Your poems reveal an interesting use of myths and legends. You have created mythical figures out of modern Bangla novels, i.e. 'Putulnacher Itikatha', 'Padma Nadir Majhi' etc. or even nursery rhymes. Why?

MR: I believe every civilization has its own tale to tell through the subtle nuances of its mythic structure. In Bangladesh, we have legends but no myths. I try to give mythical effect to these existing legends and to the characters chosen from our literature. I even write from memory and milieu of real life.

SM: I know, you were actively involved with politics. One of you lines, "Shob shala kobi hoite chai..." is still echoed by many. How do you view politics?

MR: We are condemned to be political. We inhale politics and exhale politics, we sigh politics as if it were almost erotic. I reckon there are reasons for it. But may be we are becoming a bit sick of politics and politicising. Our love is eaten, and hate is nourished by politics, while our politics itself is contaminated by love and hate.

SM: To conclude, a double bill: First, what is love?

MR: Love is compassion and concern for everything human and non-human.

SM: And music?

MR: Music is the rhythm of love and creation. If love is the inspiration of life, music is its essence.

SM: Thank you.
MR: The pleasure is mine.