

essay

# December Musings

by Kazi Fazlur Rahman

TO most of my countrymen, December is the month of joyful celebration — and rightly so. It is the month of our victory over the forces of evil personified in the marauding Pakistani army and their local henchmen. It is the month when we could first breathe the free air of the independent land of Bangladesh.

Yet to me — and I am sure to many others who survived those terror-filled days of seventy-one — it is also the month of mourning. It is the month when the memories of the relatives brutally murdered, friends tortured, colleagues maimed come back in a rush. Faces I shall never see again push themselves forward to be recognized. I am forced to remember the terror-stricken face of a friend being dragged away to face a fate of torture and death, the dumb horror in the visage of a stranger surrounded by armed killers, the bleeding face of the blind-folded young men tied together at the back of the Pakistani military jeep, the bloated bodies of young women and children in the rivers and the crows pecking at the corpses left to rot. I am compelled to relive my guilt of having failed to do anything to save or provide any succour to any of them. Didn't their death make it possible for me to live on?

In 1971, Pakistani occupation army in Bangladesh succeeded in pushing horror to the point of incomprehensibility, 'beyond words' in its most literal sense. The crimes they committed were truly beyond imagination which no rational, sane mind could grasp. Perhaps that is the reason why most foreigners, including many otherwise perfectly decent Pakistanis living in their own homes would not — rather could not — believe the reports of the horrors perpetrated by the Pakistani army. That is the reason perhaps of my failure to convey the full sense of horror of seventy-one even to our own young people. How does one explain to them that the Pakistanis planned to win their final victory by raising the horror to such a level that even imagination would be overwhelmed. And then, they calculated, the survivors would have to give up and dumbly accept the omnipotence of evil!

They failed because they did not understand that terror beyond a certain point can become counterproductive to their purpose, when random and yet unimaginable horror becomes a reality, the victims and potential victims are also made free of the fear of any greater horror. Thus the Pakistanis were de-

feated even before the first Indian tank or plane entered Bangladesh in November or December of 1971.

It was by sheer coincidence that I came across a book in the dark days of seventy-one which to my amazement, I found of great relevance to our circumstances at that time. *Farewell in Berlin* was a book by an author I had never heard of. Yet I found parts of it so consonant with my own thoughts that I kept excerpts from it in my diary.

The main character of the story was a Jew who almost miraculously managed to survive his incarceration in Nazi concentration camp. "For a Jew in the concentration camp, just existing is a triumph. I had defeated them by just surviving," he says. Living at that time within a country and reduced to the status of a vast concentration camp by the Pakistanis, I found these words both comforting and encouraging.

But his other words made me uneasy at that time and they make me uneasy even today. He goes on — "In the concentration camp, you watch the ones taken away to be tortured and killed, and you are somehow happy because you are left alive. That's my

guilt ... The people who watched or at least knew of the torture and deaths remember that they managed to forget it soon after. The surviving victims remember that they were relieved to see their friends die because it meant, at least temporarily, that they lived. So we all carry our guilt ...

Truly as a survivor in seventy-one, I cannot shake off a feeling — if not of outright guilt — at least of a moral ambiguity. And this sense of moral ambiguity is becoming, as I get on years, more generalized. We cannot but be aware of the nature of the world around us — the kinds of sufferings and injustice at work in it. Further, I am sure, we all more or less dimly sense the ways in which our own actions or rather lack of them, amount to a kind of complicity which we morally abhor.

Thus, aren't we odds not only with the world but also with a part of our own selves? Whether this is enough, in itself, to make one guilty of anything is a question I am truly unable to answer. Yet, I cannot help addressing the question to myself time and again in the month of December.

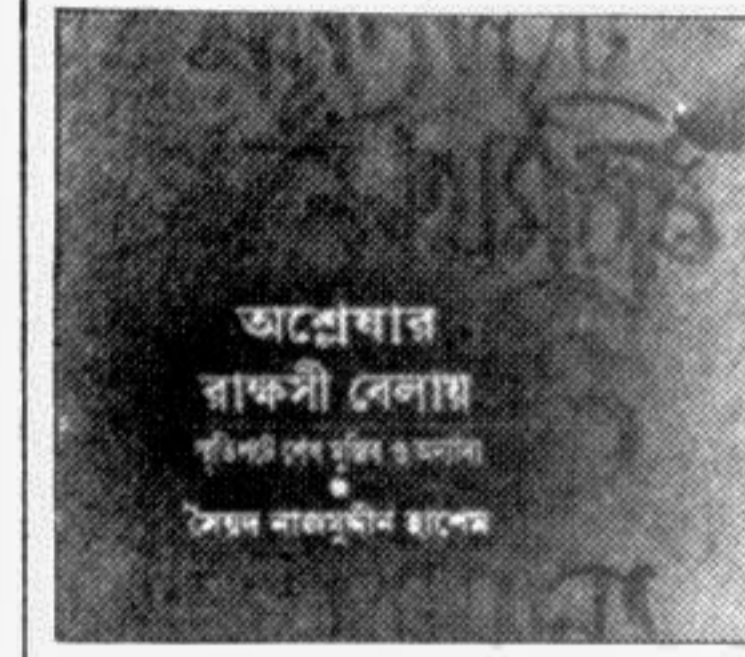
How culpable am I for the broken promises of a "Sonar Bangla" made at the dawn of independence in 1971?

books

## Ashleshar Rakshasi Belai

This is the first installment of translated excerpts from Syed Najmuddin Hashem's book *Ashleshar Rakshasi Belai* — a book of remembrances of personalities the author pays homage to.

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



### Syed Waliullah: Images

I first met Syed Waliullah in Calcutta in the year 1945. I was a student then at Presidency College, and an apprentice in journalism at The Morning News office. He had just taken up his appointment as sub-editor with The Statesman. Dawn had just broken: the water supply trucks of the City Corporation had started the day's work; the trams had not started plying for the day. Our meeting was unpre-

dicted, sudden. The smell of post-war gunpowder still hung in the air of Calcutta. Trenches and baffle-walls were the uneasy retreat of insects, snakes and moss. American G.I.s and British Tommies had long since left; some had left this earth forever perhaps in distant Burma — some had been lucky to return home. The Anglo-Indian quarters off Ripon and Elliott Streets, were suddenly quiet and empty. The air resounded with rallies, processions bearing the words — withdraw case against Netaji — or with strains from kadam, kadam barhaye jal khushike geet gaye ja. 'Chalo Calcutta Delhi chalo'. And therefore, in our sessions at the College Street Coffee House retreat, the clandestine lovers' exchanges of sweet nothings over plates of cashew nuts and cups of steaming tea — were superseded by talk of Plekhanov, Kuushinin, Manabendra Ray, Trotsky, Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, Bukharin and Stalin. To these were added discourses on Sartre, Mayakovsky, Dostoyevsky, Gorkye, the dialectics of existentialism, and socialism. I remember these days had Bishnu De, Samar Sen, Sudhin Dutta, Jibananda, Sukanta, Subhash. There we were splitting hairs. In the words of the poet Wordsworth: "Bliss was it in that down to be alive ..."

Early one morning in the aftermath of some such unresolved hair-splitting, I clicked the heels of my half-torn sandals down a Park Circus lane disturbing the sleep of neighbours no doubt, and knocked on a door. It was answered by a good looking, young man — tall and of noble mien — his face intelligent, his eyes keen. I remember his yellow shell-rimmed glasses — the steaming cup in hand, the burgundy coloured dressing gown worn over paisley print pyjamas — I remember these like a portrait framed to this day. He shared his flat with Ahmedul Kabir better known as Monu, who has feared for his sharp tongue, ruthless logic, and arrogant manners. He had recently joined a bank and was a young man of means unlike

us-but what drew our small coterie of iconoclasts to him was his unbending manner and sharpness.

Waliullah and Kabir, I soon discovered addressed each other as 'Mister' (Sahib) — this adherence to genteel Lucknow behaviour took me by surprise. Later the three of us would have a good laugh over this in other times, other cities — Dhaka, Karachi.

Many considered Waliullah a proud, snobbish, taciturn loner. But every individual's assessment is circumscribed by the moment of interaction. I remember the attraction I felt over cups of tea, on that strange but beautiful morning. Monu, bless him, confined himself all throughout to the pages of the Statesman, and joined us for tea and cigarettes only.

I have forgotten — after the lapse of so many years — what we talked about that morning — but I must have true to my nature, held forth on everything. One of the topics we liked to dwell upon was the battalion of awe-inspiring professors at Presidency College —

Susobhan, Sarkar, Tearaknath Sen, Sri Kumar Barua, Somnath Maitre, Tarapada Mukherjee, Bishnu De, Kudrat-e-Khuda, A.K. Chanda, Ahmed Ali, and the editor of The Statesman, erstwhile principal of Presidency — Wordsworth, Sudhendra Nath Datta was Waliullah's friend — not to mention Abdur Rahman Siddiki of Khilafat Movement fame. When the besotted followers hailed Mohammad Ali Jinnah as Qaid-e-Azam, Siddiki would comment derisively, "That matriculate barrister!" I was sort of an apprentice to Siddiki and one morning he pointed to his cook and said "He has threatened to quit because I call his 'leader' names. Now, I say — why don't you retaliate but don't disturb your culinary operations!" This versatile person was one day, years later, appointed the Governor of East Pakistan at the behest of his friend Ghulam Mohammad.

After that morning, Waliullah and I ran into each other now and then. His first anthology of short stories, *Nayan chara* had been published and *The Story of a Tulsi Tree* created quite a stir among the Bengali middle class. The two of us organised the first ever painting exhibition of Muslim artists in Calcutta. This was inaugurated by the noted art critic Shahed Suhrawardy. Zainul Abedin had already in the meantime earned quite a name in the wake of his now famous famine sketches which were printed in the communist party mouthpiece *Janajuddha*. However artists such as Qamrul Hasan, Shafuluddin Ahmed and Anwarul Haq received ample publicity through our exhibition. Professor Ahmed Ali and Syed Waliullah, were trying their hand at literary criticism, at the time.

... To be continued  
About the writer: Dr. Sonia N Amin is Associate Professor of History at the University of Dhaka.  
\*Ashleshar rakshasi belai — A line from a poem by Sudhendra Nath Datta. Ashleshar — an ill omened star signaling the end!

books

# Throwing Light on a Convoluted Territory

by Nuzhat Amin

QUITE a lot of creative attention has been directed towards what could be called the 'displaced individual': The creative artists' own exile (real or imaginary) or pluralistic connections or both which reiterate the complexity internalized in the notion of displacement. As the parameters of 'home-land' change and shift, there has been a reciprocal and staggering growth in critical and literary response to the question of the artist's contact or connection with his/her homeland/s.

Bharati Mukherjee figures among the eminent writers of the Indian diaspora who have found new homelands and international repute. Even so, the diasporic writer's identity and relationship to the original land continue to remain topical. On the other hand these writers also write about their own varied and pluralized views on identity and distant homelands. In many such works 'contact' with homeland/s is reviewed through registers like exile, expatriation, immigration and so on. Because of pluralized experiences 'homeland' is no longer a static signified, 'identity' does not provide a stable label nor is nationality/ethnicity perceived as an uncompounded baggage.

Bharati Mukherjee, acknowledged as a distinct voice and credited as a major writer in contemporary American literature had crossed painful stages that led to a gradual arrival for her at a point where she could confidently discard labels given to her and form her own. Mukherjee abandons the ethnic label as 'Indian' or 'Asian-American' writer and clearly places herself in the mosaic of the American scene.

Mukherjee's arrival at this destination and the various stages she had crossed before arriving at this point are marked clearly by Fakrul Alam in his well-researched book on this author. His book *Bharati Mukherjee* (Wayne's United States Authors series) has devoted a chapter each on the themes of exile, expatriation, immigration and connect-

edness drawing on Mukherjee's fictional and non-fictional output. This structure is meaningful as it replicates the chronology of events in Mukherjee's life.

Alam broaches his chapter on "Home" by reading *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. In this chapter he deals with the exile's perspective of a home that has stopped being home. Mukherjee's final acceptance that homecoming to Calcutta had cured the sense of exile she had clung on to for quite some time is elaborated upon here. In the chapter on 'Expatriation' Alam charts the passage in which Bharati as a person and writer meets the challenges of living in Canada, which she found to be a hostile society that racially denigrated and culturally alienated her. The author of *Bharati Mukherjee* traces Mukherjee's disenchantment as an expatriate. This disenchantment moves through Mukherjee's collection of stories *Darkness*, *An Invisible Woman* and culminates with *The Sorrow and Terror: The Haunting Tragedy*. Alam discusses Mukherjee's expatriate phase where her pain and artistic detachment are unmistakable. Chapter four situates itself on discussing the exuberance of immigration. Alam writes of Mukherjee's Whitmanesque jubilation. In this chapter *The Middle Man* and *Other Stories* and *Jasmine* are discussed pointing to the exuberance and expansive Americana evident in Mukherjee's works. He also rightly sees "fascinating portraits of people in transit or caught in the middle or split between an old world and a new one" (*Bharati Mukherjee* 78). Mukherjee's characters, Alam observes, "are seen to be emerging from shadowy or marginal lives and putting out feelers to root themselves in a brave new world" (*Bharati Mukherjee*, 78). In *Bharati Mukherjee* the author elaborately discusses the promise Mukherjee perceives that America held for people coming to its shores and the eagerness that is invested by them to "immerse themselves" (*Bharati Mukherjee* 118). *Bharati Mukherjee*'s fiction in a way exhales

her own sense of expansion and confidence.

In chapter five the theme is 'A Hunger for Connectedness.' The author retraces how Mukherjee had returned to a historical version of her earlier project, i.e. the making of new Americans." *Bharati Mukherjee* examines Mukherjee's attempts to "extend" mainstream American writing. In this process "interpenetration of all things and a belief in miracles and metamorphoses" (*Bharati Mukherjee*, 120) play an important part as the author's reading of *The Holder of the World* shows. In this work Alam sees "a reconciliation of the Indian part of her heritage with the part that wants to celebrate immigrating to America" (*Bharati Mukherjee*, 137).

The structure of *Bharati Mukherjee* works very well. It traces the gradual transformation of Mukherjee from one who perceived herself as an exile-away-from-India emerges as an energetic artist who creates fabulous inter-connections in history. By this token she is no longer straitjacketed to her Indian identity but is able to create new and pluralistic connections. The disappointment and acceptance that the homecoming to Calcutta had been unsuccessful rounds off with this transformation that has taken place in Mukherjee's life, both in personal terms as well in an author who understands displacement differently.

The reader will find in the introductory chapter of *Bharati Mukherjee* a detailed account of what shaped Mukherjee as a person and influenced her career as a writer-academic. The fullness of this chapter is echoed in the concluding chapter. The author has discussed four novels, two collections of short fiction and prose works of Mukherjee in the core chapters of the book and ends it with informed reading of Mukherjee's critics. Alam concludes his work on this major American writer by asserting her place as an innovative fiction writer.

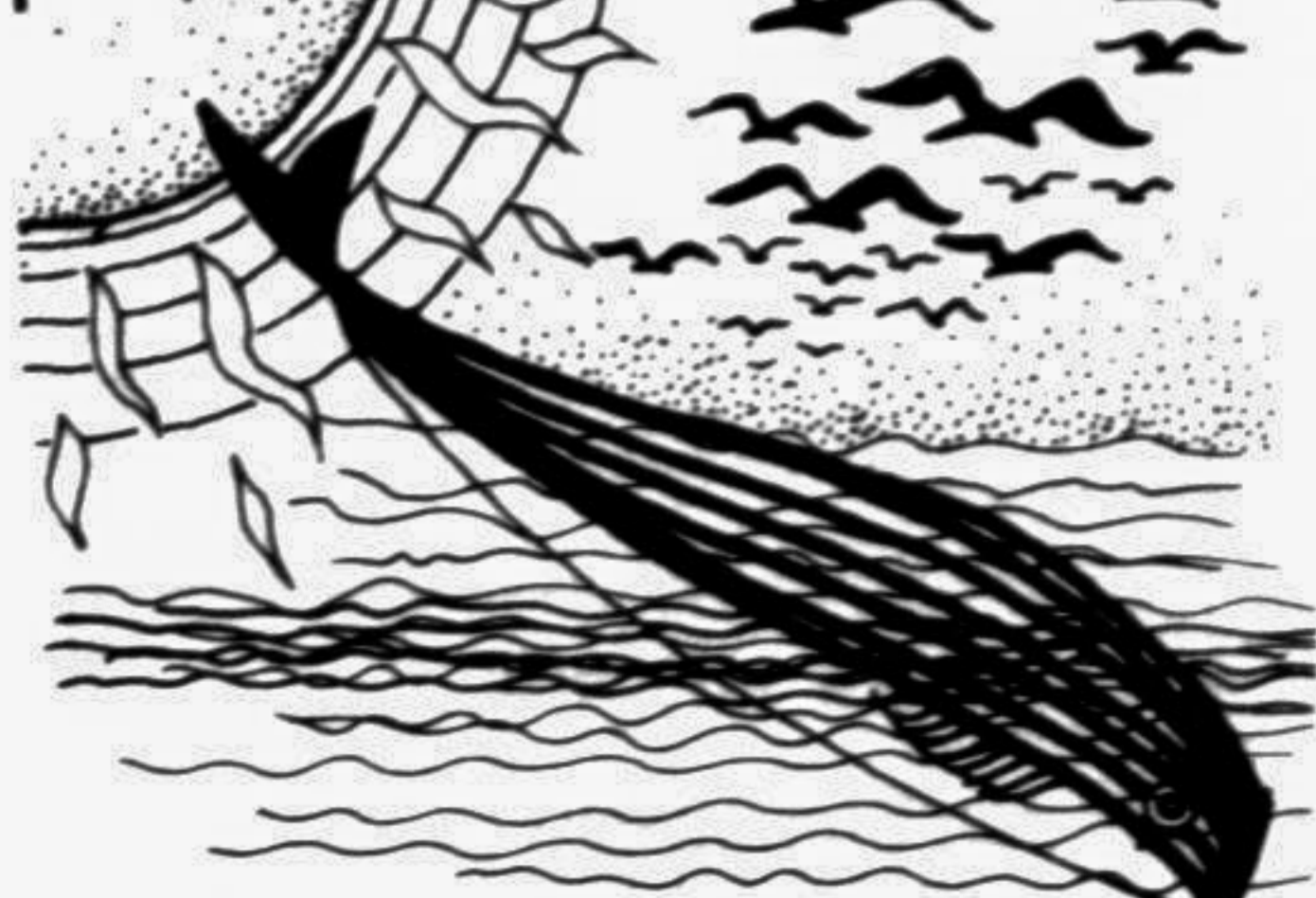
*Bharati Mukherjee* gives comprehensive readings and analyses of Mukherjee's literary and non-fictional output. This also in-



dexes Mukherjee's response to her different journeys and displacements. Alam succeeds in throwing light what is a convoluted territory. In other words, in *Bharati Mukherjee* Alam succinctly draws out and reproduces the polymorphous atmosphere of Mukherjee's world. He leaves signposts for the benefit of the general readership's understanding with regard to identity, the narrative and the way creativity internalises cross-culturalism.

About the writer: Nuzhat Amin is lecturer of English at Dhaka University.

poem



## In Praise of Feeling Bad about Yourself

by Wislawa Szymborska

The buzzard never says it is to blame.  
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.  
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.  
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.  
  
A jackal doesn't understand remorse.  
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.  
Why should they, when they know they're right?  
  
Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,  
in every other way they're light.  
  
On this third planet of the sun  
among the signs of bestiality  
a clear conscience is Number One.

From Wislawa Szymborska's collected poems. View with a Grain of Sand (translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh), which has been published by Faber in October this year.

exhibition

# Beauty and Barrenness of a Sentimental Soil

by Ekram Kabir

THERE are painful paradoxes about Bangladesh's countryside: "beauty" on one side and "barrenness" on the other. Beauty in terms of Nature, simplicity and over-the-noon openness; and barrenness in terms of poverty, hunger and the relentless struggle of life. Telling stories of both the grandiose and morbid candidly by anybody in today's world is a daunting task. And when it comes in to a painter's periphery, maintaining honesty with devotion is like pulling the Devil by the tail. Painter Mansur ul Karim's works in an 8-day-long solo painting exhibition (Nov 18-25 of oil and water colours at Shilpangan reflects a persistent devotion to his domain.

The 45-year-old painter, in his isolation from the media, went out of his way to the rural areas, studied the lives of the village folk (mostly of the working class who sweat in the farm lands) and rediscovered the ultimate and inseparable relationship between "nature" and "human beings".

Although Mansur-ul-Karim has emphasised, mostly on the beautiful aspects in his *Story of Fields* series numbering 34 out of all the 44 exhibits at Shilpangan, yet visitors at the exhibition also witnessed sadness in some of them.

Among a host of landscape painters, Mansur ministers to his countrified, sometimes arcadian, colour-play on the canvases that arrests the minds with a swarm of singularities which make him noteworthy. "His recent paintings are examples of works by an artist who has mastered the techniques with relentless experimentations and research and has also reached a matured vision where he could give his imagination an effortless flare and buoyancy," says the literature made available at the gallery.

Mansur's landscapes not only represent a material object but also the conception of a material object. They project an idea side by side with a thing — both of these pour out of a feeling for form which doesn't sur-

face in terms of outline or drawing, but in patches of light and shade. In other words, he paints the edges of the forms which merge into one another or into the tone of the background.

Take his *Generation* for example — a story of decaying social values — where he spreads out white pigments deliberately on a 120x187 centimetre canvas as a form of expression. This could be a very difficult task for an artist to keep a large portion of a composition white. And this particular one, from a formidable distance, wears the character of a lithograph.

Nature is essentially full of geometrical figures, and Mansur's canvases contain many of them; but he, from his heart, has avoided "cubism", for his impressionism, highly symbolic, are ideas that come from the realities of rural life where seasons play the most vital roles. And that is why he leaves his human figures mostly 'headless', which again, points at the inter-dependability of man and nature — on the one hand man exploits the nature to

life, and on the other, the latter controls the former's lives; both of which are messages of certainty and uncertainty. The idea is quite interesting, for from a layman's point of view, it can be seen as "a game to spoil the game" — beauty at the expense of beauty itself, and also, barrenness at the expense of beauty.

The mind of this eight award-winning (both nationally and internationally) artist who is a Fine-Arts department professor at Chittagong University explores anthropology, as he goes back to millions of years back while imaging the time of creation of both human beings and their surroundings in *My Story-2*. There are more to his primitive mind which he sets his mind: sail to discover the male-female relationship in his *Birth of Love*. Mansur's human figures are not rigid and muscular; there is subtle softness given by the artist which characterises him as a colourist with an ocean of love for the mankind.

What makes him all the



Mansur ul-Karim: Stitching mankind and nature together

more different from others is that Mansur juxtaposes the glimpse of the environment, while piecing many after a lot of contemplation and gives it a singular entity. He doesn't remain confined to any prevailing genre but of his own which at the same time implies literary elements and the choice of moments in the story so that the audience can know, or guess, what has happened and what is about to happen. And there lies Mansur's creative panache.