Firdous Azim

THOUGH MAITREYI DEVI'S *NA HANNATE* was written as a response to Mircea Eliade's book, it was the later novel that I read first. That first perusal was a wonderful experience — here was a seemingly spontaneous and unabashed outpouring of a young woman's passion for a man from a distant land. Maitreyi Devi takes on the name of Amrita, and writing from a distance of many years, enables herself, in her late fifties, a famous writer and feminist activist, to examine her youthful experience of being in love.

But it was only on reading Mircea Eliade's *Bengal Nights*, which I did many years later, (without having seen the video of the film) that the colonial dimensions of the romance became visible to me. Mircea Eliade fictionalises his autobiography, calling himself Alain, disguising his identity as an Indian scholar to appear as a civil engineer. Immediately the book rings false, as many of the interests that the hero displays can only be the purview of the Orientalist scholar.

These 'interests' bring the colonial motif into full focus, giving the novel a nearly anthropological air. For example, the first chapter not only introduces Maitreyi, the Indian heroine, but her 'costume, her jewels and ornaments' which her father makes her display so that they can be examined by the European visitors. In the meantime, Maitreyi is seen to be standing, her face ashen, trembling from head to foot as though shaken with pure terror. This passage sent me scrambling for a book I had read long ago written by another European traveller to Bengal. The book I was reminded of was Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. The tropical region that held Levi-Strauss's interest is situated on the other side of the globe, in South America, but on a short visit to Dhaka in the early 1950's Levi-Strauss had stayed in the flat of a young sociology lecturer of Dhaka University. His book records how this young lecturer had made his wife take out all her various pieces of clothing, including her underwear from a chest-of-drawers, for the examination of the French anthropologist. The wife, in a manner similar to the young Maitreyi, is shown as standing quietly, like a silent, frightened doe.

Why did Mircea Eliade's recounting of his youthful love affair remind me of a piece of anthropological work? What has love got to do with the kind of 'objective, scientific' enquiry that anthropology demands? Even as Mircea/Alain pours out his love and longing for the young Maitreyi, the cultural difference between the lovers is highlighted, giving the book an unmistakable racial and anthropological overtone. Our hero is always the European in India, curious about Indian ways, and what better entry into a culture than through its women? In both books, (Eliade's and Levi-Strauss's), the eastern woman is opened to the purview of the western gaze, posed as a medium through which 'other' cultures can be gleaned and understood. The western observer is positioned as explorer, delving into the secrets of this other world.

But, you may say, I am reading too much into what is simply an outpouring of love and thwarted desire. That this is not so is proved simply by reading Maitreyi Devi's response to the book. What shameful lies' she says to his friend Sergui and feels that the book has demeaned their love. 'He has loved me so much' she writes in her own English version of the book, 'has introduced me to every person in his country.' She does not like this exposure, and considers the whole story as a lie - 'But why does he portray me as something that I was not?' The book reads like an 'indignity' to Indian womanhood, and she goes on to write 'He has been, for the last forty years, selling my flesh for a price. This is the Western world! That their love has been commodified, objectified, held up to view, is something that comes as a shock to the woman.

Maitreyi Devi, writer and activist in her own right, does pen a reply. Her reply takes on a completely different dimension, as she examines not only the youthful romance, but herself as a young girl. Surprisingly, for both male and female writer, the woman remains the centre of attention, but while the male writer concentrates on the love affair, the woman writer tries to recreate, bring within the purview of her own gaze, the young girl she had been forty years ago. It is not only the girl in love, but the budding poet, the vain young woman, who is portrayed here. The reader is made to swoon with the heroine as Mircea touches her hand for the first time, or to grieve with her on her wedding night or to wonder at the nature of her relationship with the famous Tagore.

Mircea Eliade's concentration on the love affair creates an erotic and exotic atmosphere, while Maitreyi Devi carefully records the transitional nature of Bengali society in the 1930's, and describes the winds of change as they worked to transform the lives of women even within the sanctum of the Indian household. Cultural details, such as going to see a dance performance by Uday Shankar, lend an added interest to her book. So, having accused Mircea Eliade of lying, does Maitreyi Devi proceed to tell the truth? Though her account is fuller, the truth seems to be equally hidden behind a host of postures and poses. Ultimately, Maitreyi Devi takes shelter behind conventional postures and roles, the coy and shy maiden in love and later the happy and fulfilled wife. Her emphatic denial of sexual union with Mircea Eliade leaves the reader wondering, as does her portrayal of an ideal husband and marriage.

The meeting between cultures that the European colonial venture brought in its wake has provided an unending source of stories and anecdotes. The romantic potential of these encounters still provides a fund of inspiration and is written and rewritten all the time. The Maitreyi Devi/Mircea Eliade episode has already had many re-runs, with both books being produced in English, and the film version of Mircea's story. Reading the two books together makes us wonder anew about the many dimensions of the colonial venture.

essay

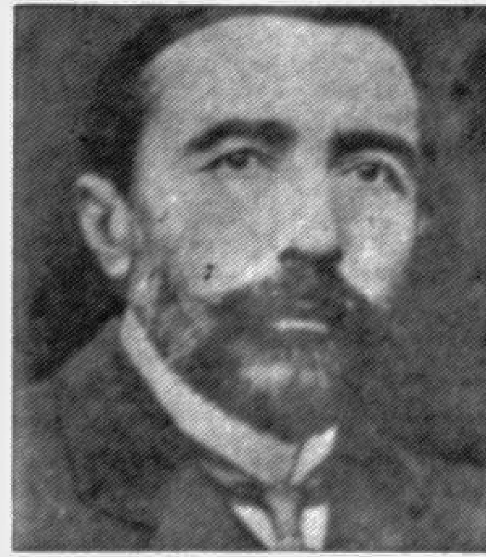
The Dark and the Dry: Two Novelistic Views of Colonialism

by Serajul Islam Chowdhury

"FICTION is history, or it is nothing," Joseph Conrad has once noted, and both he and E.M. Forster, different though they are from each other in many respects, have put a very important fact of history, namely, colonialism in their well-known fictional writings, *Heart of Darkness* and *A Passage to India*. The differences between the two novelists can, for own purpose here, be usefully summed up by categorizing them as conservative and liberal, respectively, notforgetting the limitations of such categorizations.

It is easy to see that Conrad is essentially conservative in his outlook. He is an artist of tragic acceptance, and does not find reasons to believe in either progress or democracy. The understanding Conrad has gained from his knowledge and observations is that man is incapable of change, and that what man has been doing over the centuries is improving the techniques of oppression on each other. Bertrand Russell in his *Autobiography* remembered the illumination he felt while having a conversation with Conrad. The illumination, one could say, not of light but of darkness. It is neither peripheral nor accidental that Conrad's most moving and justly famous work, *Heart of Darkness* should have darkness for its theme. He had seen darkness in the dark continent as well as in the enlightened cities and also, more importantly, in the hearts of men — belonging to history and beyond. For him colonialism in the post-Victorian world was a manifestation of a ubiquitous darkness.

Forster is different. He believes in democracy, tolerance and friendship, and, despite his unavoidable awareness that life is full of suffering, refuses to accept it as a tragedy. His liberal protagonist Margaret Schlegel in *Howards End* felt, at a critical moment in her career, that some closing of gates is inevitable at thirty; if the soul itself is to become creative; but he himself remained unwilling to close the gates, which may be one of the reasons why after *A Passage to India* he gave up writing novels, although he lived an otherwise active life of more than fifty years after it. In an essay he wrote in 1907, he noted that it is not unlikely that there should be a separation between the writer and the man, for whereas the writer looks for "What is permanent even if it is cheerful and noble and gracious, even if it is transitory." The man in Forster interfere with the writer in him, advising him not to be tragic. Lionel Trilling, the first and the most liberal of Forster's critics, has spoken of the novelists refusal to be great, which refusal, it is not unfair to think, is of a piece with his refusal to be tragic.



Joseph Conrad

E. M. Forster

The difference between the tragic writer and the one who refused to be tragic answers why and where Conrad, in the colonial context, saw darkness whereas Forster found only dryness. Not that darkness is unavailable in *A Passage to India*. The Marabar caves are dark, so are the intellects of most people. India is incomprehensible with vicious sliding into nightmares, mysteries becoming muddles, but the unmistakable fact remains that Forster sees colonialism in terms of dryness, and not darkness.

Dryness is curable; darkness is not. Forster recommends kindness and secret understanding of the heart as qualities in man capable of removing dryness in personal relationship. He never accepted that *A Passage to India* is about politics, and there can be no unwillingness in us to call it a work primarily on the problems of friendship; but politics remains almost everywhere in the novel like those insects and flies which it is impossible in India to keep out or drive away.

It is typical of the European Conrad that *Heart of Darkness* should be intensely political and of the Anglo-Saxon Forster that politics should be guarded against, as far as possible. Conrad wrote his work in 1899; Forster his in 1924. The intervening quarter of a century had seen a war of a type never experienced before, and a revolution with an impact greater than that of the French Revolution. Although Dr. Aziz says in his excitement, "but next Europe war — aha, aha! then is our time," his creator remains the Jane Austenite that he is and looks for scenes and incidents of personal relationship rather than political clashes. The man wants to gain at the cost of the writer.

In Conrad the man and the writer are one. For him darkness is all enveloping, it is mysterious, inscrutable and unspeakable, among other things. It was there before history began, but in modern times it has become particularly ugly, for it is the work of "sordid buccaneers who pretend to be philanthropic and are really "reckless without hardihood greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage." Conrad has seen the face behind the masque; he knows that colonialism is plunder in the guise of trade. Among the well-known passages in Marlow's narration is "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter nose than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too closely."

Clearly, and understandably, Forster view of colonialism is not as close as Conrad's. Forster is a writer of water and rains, of the developed heart, that is. And it is certainly a pity that he cannot write on that theme and that, on the contrary, he is obliged to dwell on dryness, summer and thirst. True, he does not accept the story of the Marabar caves in summer as the final truth, and adds a third part to the novel in which rains pour in abundance, bringing friends together, making the birth of forgiveness and removal of misunderstanding possible.

About the writer: Serajul Islam Chowdhury is professor of English at Dhaka University

To be continued.

travel tale

A Trip to Sylhet

by Waheedul Haque

CHHAYA joined me from her native Rajbari for a trip to Sylhet. For those coming from across the Padma it is a rarity to venture east beyond Dhaka. So with the great adventurer from the west I went up to the great railway station called Kamalapur, the abode Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. At 1.30 noon it was as desolate as the sandy wastes of Rub-el-Khali. My companion was feeling uneasy as a woman does so easily in any kind of desolation. Is it a station platform? Why, that looks like a train over there! she said. When I said it was so indeed, she just sighed and said, Imagine Howrah or Sealdah. She could well say that. She has come to visit her family on vacation from her musical studies at the Rabindra-Bharati, Jorasanko, Calcutta.

Our tickets showed us to a compartment of the *Shobhan* class. I guessed this should be a showpiece compared to what a *Sulobh* class coach is — or the second class compartments of the Indian Railway. Well, the interior was very discouraging with a worn unkempt look and the seats were not only dusty, they were torn at places with their innards making quite an *ashobhan* show.

Soma and Shubho, a hilarious brother-sister duo, had preceded us to the coach and the seats reserved for us four were particularly uninviting with jute threads peeping out of rexin toppings. To make things worse the mid-day sun bore down on us in full strength. We were for a moment delighted to find that we were really not condemned to an eight-hour confinement to trying accommodation. For the whole compartment wore the same appearance of desolation as did the station platform and we could indeed sit anywhere around. Soon enough a sense of discomfiture overcame us. Somehow it doesn't feel right to be a single passenger inside a moving train compartment. You start having all kinds of ideas — mostly tending to a fear psychosis. I could not help remembering one of my journeys to Khulna when for the most part over a longish stretch from Kushtia I was all alone in a compartment but for one woman smuggler past middle age. The ambiance was perfectly ghoulish. Anything could happen any time. Eventually I was diverted by a drama of policemen coming up and demanding tickets from the lady and beating a hasty retreat in the face of what unprintables she hurled at them.

On the Sylhet train we didn't get that kind of creeps. It was day, we were four and besides there were others — ten or twelve other people. I was in fact feeling bad for a different reason. Poor Bangladesh Railway!

In an overpopulous nation all moving contraptions are naturally overcrowded and a busman wouldn't move a metre with his rooftop still having some room. Every 52-seater wants a century and it gets it all the time round the year. Dhaka-Sylhet by bus is not a popular prospect even after bridges have cut the number of ferries to one — on the Meghna at Bhairab — and travel time to a reliable six hours. Even this dreaded journey is negotiated by fully loaded buses. I later discovered that there were one or two services that charged luxury fares at about double the normal but do not at all offer any luxury or exclusiveness and moreover take a full hour or more than the others to complete its haul. Even these are fully occupied on every one of their trips. Then why doesn't BR have the same passenger turn out? It may of course be that the mid-day train to Sylhet is not popular but the morning train — Parabat — is. Is this mid-day run kept only to reach the locomotives to Sylhet to come back to Dhaka next morning as Jayantika? Then why not slash its fare drastically to seventy from the current 130 and attract a crowd? No problem if the turn out only doubles and the income remains the same. You are carrying more people and by so doing you are helping national economy as well as helping people keep their preference for trains.

The Europeans are very train-minded and the British are no less. But the Japanese have beaten them hollow in this. One great difference between the two super-rich nations across the Pacific is that the Japanese do not drive to their place of work and the Americans have no trains to theirs — patently because they don't like the idea of public transport. The individualists! The subcontinental people are no less train-spirited. But they do not move so much — they do not either drive to their place of work or take a train or steamer to it. Except in Kerala all in India and elsewhere in the subcontinent simply slum near the workplace and live for work alone and no play.

People in Bangladesh are no great movers there being very little industrialisation and the belated swelling of Dhaka being far from a result of development. The 25-year long obesity run of Dhaka is a testament to the pauperisation of Bangladesh's mainstay of productive forces — the peasant. The swelling of Dhaka has hardly contributed to a matching increase in long-haul travel. Short-haul travel, however, has gained immensely. The BR, in a fit of elitistic dreaming in the Zia-Mashiur Rahman times, hit upon the Inter-City spectacular and invested all of its meagre resources to it, abandoning its best clients — the small traveller moving less than a 100 kilometres. If only BR knew that their interest lay in moving more people over shorter distances — the buses wouldn't have had an empty field to score all the goals.

Out domestic traveller, whatever his number, was, however, all along very very very train-minded. The train — BR in this case — betrayed him very deliberately and systematically over decades — the recent years being particularly killing. You can reach everywhere by bus — thousands of miles of roads were laid for the buses to mint money and foul the air. And not a metre of rail track was added to the very inadequate train network. Where the train could reach, the buses take you there faster and, wonder of wonders, cheaper. The last nail in the passenger's coffin was driven when you got a train but no service — none at all.

We alighted after the long journey at a station I supposed was Sylhet. There was no way of knowing it. And the pre-recorded announcements over the speaker become a torture by the time you reach your destination. And the station was as dark as, say Khulna's is. I was lucky to have two thoroughbred Sylhetians with me. Otherwise I would be lost as I was in Khulna where I had no idea which side I should disembark and on the platform the few I met would not tell which side was way out to the city and which back to the yard.

We huddled into an autorickshaw hired after summary haggling in Sylheti abracadabra. Professor Aziz and his wife received me and Chhaya and my two companions — the lights of their eyes they were — with surpassing warmth. They put us to a good night's rest but not before we had talked them a hundred minutes past their retiring hour. I did not forget to phone Rana Sinha, Sylhet's only dependable Tagore song artist of both repute and popularity, to fix things for the next day, the only one Chhaya and I shall be in the town.

The fixing was too good for us two. The next day started with a visit to the Sangit Parishad, a music school run very fruitfully — productwise that is — by Ramkanai Das and his daughter Kaberi. Ramkanai is possibly the best of our exponents of kheyal singing — which is popularly but quite erroneously called classical music. And he has to my mind a kind of pedigree that very few in the subcontinent can boast of. He doesn't look like around mid-sixties and he abhors aplomb that could be his without even asking. A farmer's son from Sunamganj he got hooked up by music early in his life. Living under the same roof with an authoritarian father there was not much scope to abscond nightly and enjoy *jatra* shows miles away. He proposed that he live on a stilt platform to guard their far off crop fields at night and at daybreak start ploughing and doing the fields in every needful. Father agreed but to keep the agreement effective Ramkanai had to ensure an increase in crop output. He sacrificed sleep for going to the *jatra* and other musical shows that continue from dusk to daybreak. That was his true apprenticeship. And this background plus his talent prepared him eventually to join a *jatra* repertory team. You know as what? As a *tabla* player. But, unknown to all in the towns and the middle class cognoscenti, the *jatra* music does not use *tabla* as we here it on radio and TV and at all kinds of musical recitals. A *tabla* player in the *jatra* in fact plays the *pakhwaj* on the *tabla* — complemented fully with the effect sounds that the theatrical denouement of the show calls for. How come Ramkanai got into this esoteric art and even picked up some mastery over it?

Ramkanai Das at various times took lessons in *kheyal* singing from Umesh Babu of Brahmanbaria and Rashbihari Chakraborti of Sreemangal. I have a hunch that what Ramkanai sings is not altogether what he was taught to sing. *Kheyal* needs spontaneous creativity and a very delicate sense of the beautiful which must again speak of immaculate taste. A *kheyal* performance short on any of these is noisemaking of the most abominable kind. Ramkanai's songs are rich in all three and the quality they produce is Ramkanai's very own achievement. His atrocious Hindi pronunciation — *kheyal* compositions are all in various kinds of folk Hindi — excepted he is the best *kheyal* artist we have now. And Kaberi is already showing promises of inheriting her father's mantle.

This was school exam season all over Bangladesh. This notwithstanding, there was a big turn-out of students at Sangeet Parishad who reported for a session of training in Tagore song. Wonderful kids. But how would they turn out as Tagore singers? Rabindrasangeet is not only music, it is culture. But to get its music right in your performance you will need a kind of grooming that is not available either in West Bengal or Bangladesh — after the passing of Sailaja Ranjan Majumdar. To soak yourself in the other elements present in Rabindrasangeet and to transmute them into art and communicate this all to the listener is too tall an order even for the best in our country or the ones across.

We had a snappy lunch to allow us a tour of a tea garden. Chhaya was a newcomer to tea country. She must not come back from Sylhet without having a feel of the tea thing at the growth and production level. Subroto, the ever smiling young businessman with a genuine interest in things cultural, took us all in his microbus and started for Luckatoora, the garden almost inside the Sylhet town. The understanding was we shall not stay more than two hours at the garden and must return to Rana Singha's place for another session of musical training. And we couldn't make the session in time, we overspent our time at the garden. We had to. We had literally to extricate ourselves from that ideal retreat that seemed to be quite out of this world although it was swathed in the vivid light of an autumn midday.

Assistant Manager Intekhab Alam — his parents must be incurable cricket buffs — was all hospitality to a bevy of guests that came unannounced and were complete strangers to him in the bargain. His wife insisted on our taking tea before we leave. Mr Alam accompanied us on a motorcycle. The first thing that impressed us all in a tea garden had nothing to do with tea or any scenic beauty. The climb to Mr Alam's bungalow was steeper than we had any earlier experience of. It must have been more than 45 degree. And when our 1500cc microbus steadily negotiated that we literally had creeps. Seeing Mr Alam come up that slope in his none-too-powerful motorbike confirmed our ignorance about engine power.

Mr Alam piloted us into the interior of the garden and stopped at a point that seemed dear to him. Alighting we also fell in love with the milieu in no time. The spot was enclosed by three hillocks of terraced tea plants almost cascading to our feet. Mr Alam and myself readily started competing to impress Chhaya — a rustic come to town, as if — with our wonderful knowledge of tea plants and plantations and of tea-testing etc, etc. But we had to stop. The banter seemed quite out of place there. The many-shaded green all around was all fresh and tender although the half-man-height trees holding this forth were all past at least eighty years of age. And they all exuded a quiet — and a strange stillness engulfed us. It said hush! And we listened to a perfect soundlessness. In subcontinental music there is a concept of *anahata naada* — the unstruck sound. Were we listening to that?

The reverie had to break. Mrs Alam must be waiting with her tea things all by herself. The couple had still their first child to arrive. It was a generous tea offered in all kindness and bonhommie. We were finding it hard to part specially when we came to know that the mistress of the house had only the other day become a student of a music teacher who was in our team. The selfsame Rana it was. Arrival of a new set of guests made light of our potentially heavy parting.

At Rana's another group of young hopefuls were waiting to sit with us over songs. We were feeling guilty for having been late by nearly two hours. But then we remembered the railway rule of the late coming train leaving the earlier — in order that of the two trains at least one can keep time, off we went to Boi-Patro, the Zindabazar bookshop *extrordinaire*.

Shubhendu Imam, cultural activist and intellectual *par se*, has already in his early forties scored the best point of his hopefully long long life by opening up this wonderful shop, the like of which will be hard to find in Dhaka. And unlike even the best of Dhaka bookshops, Boi-Patra is a regular evening haunt of the local writers and intellectuals.

To be continued