



impression

Oh to be in England: A Returnee Migrant's Re-visit

by Fazlul Alam

ENGLAND was my home for twenty five years. I returned to Bangladesh, my real home after that period, and was rebuked by almost everyone in earshot distance in curt expressions, 'What a fool you are!', or 'You must be mad!'. Like a disobedient child, I stuck to my position that I was neither a fool, nor mad, and that I returned at my own free will and hoped to accomplish something by returning. Last month, I had a short break in England. I should admit that I had already developed a sense of doubt about my decision to return. I thought I would now be in a better position to reassess the lives and living of my compatriots in England after having lived two years in Bangladesh.

The "airline of the year", Emirates in its latest Boeing 777 whisked me off the ground and into the air majestically. All the inflight entertainment, food and service were made instantly available to a humble 'economy class' passenger like myself. Since the plane was only half full from Dubai to London (migrant labours are no more required in England, there are plentiful of British born 'ethnic minorities' forming reserve industrial army!), unlike the plane from Dhaka to Dubai, I stretched myself in two seats reflecting on what I had done by leaving England. The confused thought led me to a sound sleep until the touchdown at Gatwick Airport. I was to go to a small village called Alton in Hampshire. The route was complicated. From Gatwick airport by special link to Gatwick railway station, then to Clapham Junction by another train, change for Woking and after an hour's wait, a local train would take me to Alton, the last railway station in that track. Altogether, four hours or over for a distance that I used to cover in 45 minutes by car. England was certainly not a paradise for traveller without car!

I don't know for whatever reason, the poem Oh To be in England was ringing in my ear with whatever rhythm or jerk I was experiencing in the train. Sadly, the timing of my visit seemed wrong. It

My host was to meet me at 12.30, still an hour, at "Yeoman", a 'pub' (public house - selling alcoholic as well non-alcoholic drinks and some of them sell excellent pub lunch). I decided to kill an hour in the books and music shop. It was very attractively decorated with numbered "bestsellers" at a corner. As I knew already, Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes was number one. I opened its first poem and read it. Oh! just as I thought. Ted was waiting to meet the Fulbright Scholars at Strand - the story of the fateful meeting with Sylvia Plath. He was expectant of something to happen, and he was apologetic of himself being a naive in love. A few more poems convinced me that it was nothing but an apology in poetic form and telling the world that Sylvia's suicide was not his making. Arundhati Roy with her maiden novel God of Small Things was in lucky number seven and still selling well. Next to me was a mature woman, fiftish, I think.

She abruptly asked me if I read that novel, pointing to Arundhati Roy.

was a very cloudy day and cold too with occasional showers. I could see the daffodil and tulip bulbs trying to raise their heads from the cold rain soaked ground without much success. Sorry, Robert Browning, I should have waited another month or two. The train compartment was not too tidy with newspapers strewn all over, with some showing yesterday's date, but good seats, toilets with washing facilities nearby compensated. I picked up a torn page of a national newspaper, and startled as I read, "Train Rapist Strike Again! Girl, 12 raped in the toilet of 7am train to London Bridge". Immediately, the rape news particularly involving young girls and women in Bangladesh flashed in my mind. I carried on reading the news. It was suspected that the "train rapist" (the police were working on a theory that it was the same man) was also responsible for indecent assault and actual rape of some boys on another morning train. I was wondering what these girls and boys were doing on the train so early. Oh, yes! I remembered that the small villages and hamlets have no secondary schools in their localities, so the students are sent some distance away, like Alton's children go to Farnham (12 miles), or to Winchester, even Basingstoke (much longer distance).

The train reached Alton, a townlike tiny village with one high street, a few old style hotels, supermarkets/grocers, butchers, chemists, newspa-

per/cigarette shops, books and music shop, bakery, charity shop, travel agents, an old cinema hall, a health centre, police station, a town hall, a couple of curry houses, one chinese takeaway - just as they are monotonously present almost in all towns in England. Not many people on the high street, side streets are almost deserted. People passing by looked curiously at me - not because I was Asian by look, but because they hadn't seen me there before. Being a small place, they know almost everyone who roam their streets.

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well. Next to me was a mature woman, fiftish, I think. She abruptly asked me if I read that novel, pointing to Arundhati Roy. I said "Not yet". "You must read it, it's about your country", I mumbled, "Oh yes, I know, but..." I stopped. She looked askance. I added, "Yes, yes" and bade goodbye to her sheepishly, not forgetting to buy a morning paper from the shop. In Bangladesh, I could have started a full blooded argument telling her that the British people liked it because it rang of a colonial climate and it contained what Edward Said ironically phrased "the civilising force" of the Europeans as the euphemism for brute colonialism. Did the cold British climate and the fear of being called a 'barbarian' myself dampened me? May be, but my arguments would not have fitted there anyway!

Finding the pub was no problem. I bought myself a drink, settled in a corner and opened the paper. The headline of the paper immediately drew my attention "South Bank Facelift Scrapped". South Bank is the pride of London's arts activities. For years, it was neglected and became a paradise for homeless, junks and vagabonds for sleeping rough and sheltering from the onslaught of cold weather. In contrast to many arts centre of the European, Australian, Canadian and American cities, it was in a shamble. An ambitious architectural plan was drawn up, but the new Minister for Culture after recent political

changes in the Parliament simply threw out the project estimated to cost 135 million British sterling.

Good start of the day, I thought. Now who was going to foot the bill for such a massive project planning. The Arts Council, who else? And this meagre 7 million pounds would come from the British public who had never been consulted! Ha ha, democracy, it is called. However, the political tales of intrigues and untold bits would soon be revealed. A Tory minister once developed friendship with one Mr Bernard, chairman of the South Bank Centre Foundation. Mr Bernard gave the minister key to his Mayfair flat where the latter's dalliance with an Italian beauty took place and duly leaked. The minister resigned and failed to be elected next time, but was rewarded with the last British governorship of Hong Kong. In the meantime, Mr Bernard came close with the present Culture Minister (Labour). Well, Bangladeshi tales of intrigues and political ups and downs looked like so minor matters to these.

My host arrived on time, and soon cheered me up with the news CSA was to be scrapped. This was something I knew bound to happen. Child Support Agency better known as the CSA since its inception during Conservative era was criticised as an inefficient bureaucratic body to save government's money in the social fund. It was set up to redress children's sufferings one of whose parents

had left. The missing partners were originally ordered to pay maintenance, but they never did or did only occasionally. CSA was to trace them and force them to pay. The missing partners (usually men) claimed that the other partners (usually the women or mothers with whom the children lived) had in the meantime found men to live with clandestinely. As a result of this wrangle, money due to the children were never received, nor did the government's social fund spare a penny. As a result, half a million cases were unresolved, and the children born out of wedlock or in marriage whose fathers or mothers (quite a few) had vanished, continue to suffer because their cases are not sorted out. In other words, the very children who were to benefit from the CSA had become more hard pressed than before.

The background of the tale is that more children are born out of wedlock in European countries than in wedlock. The trend was set as early as the sixties but did not culminate till late eighties. Theoretically, the marriage or no marriage, children born are not to suffer. But the problem was that in most cases, these children were not planned. Mothers conceived because the contraceptives, the very central contributing factor of the 'permissive society' did not work. Many had sued the contraceptive companies successfully, but the fact remained that the children however loved were unwanted and for various reasons (including lack of money) were being neglected.

My host ordered, after consulting me, something for us to eat, as he had nothing cooked at home. I always liked the pub lunch, particularly steak and kidney pie with sausage, beans and chips (labelled a very ill-nourishing food by health gurus), and enjoyed it after a long year. Then we walked to cover a distance of about a mile. Buses were plying, but the minimum fare being 75pence, the host thought walking would save us some money. That I was tired dead was not noticed. I had already submitted myself to the host and complied.

To be continued

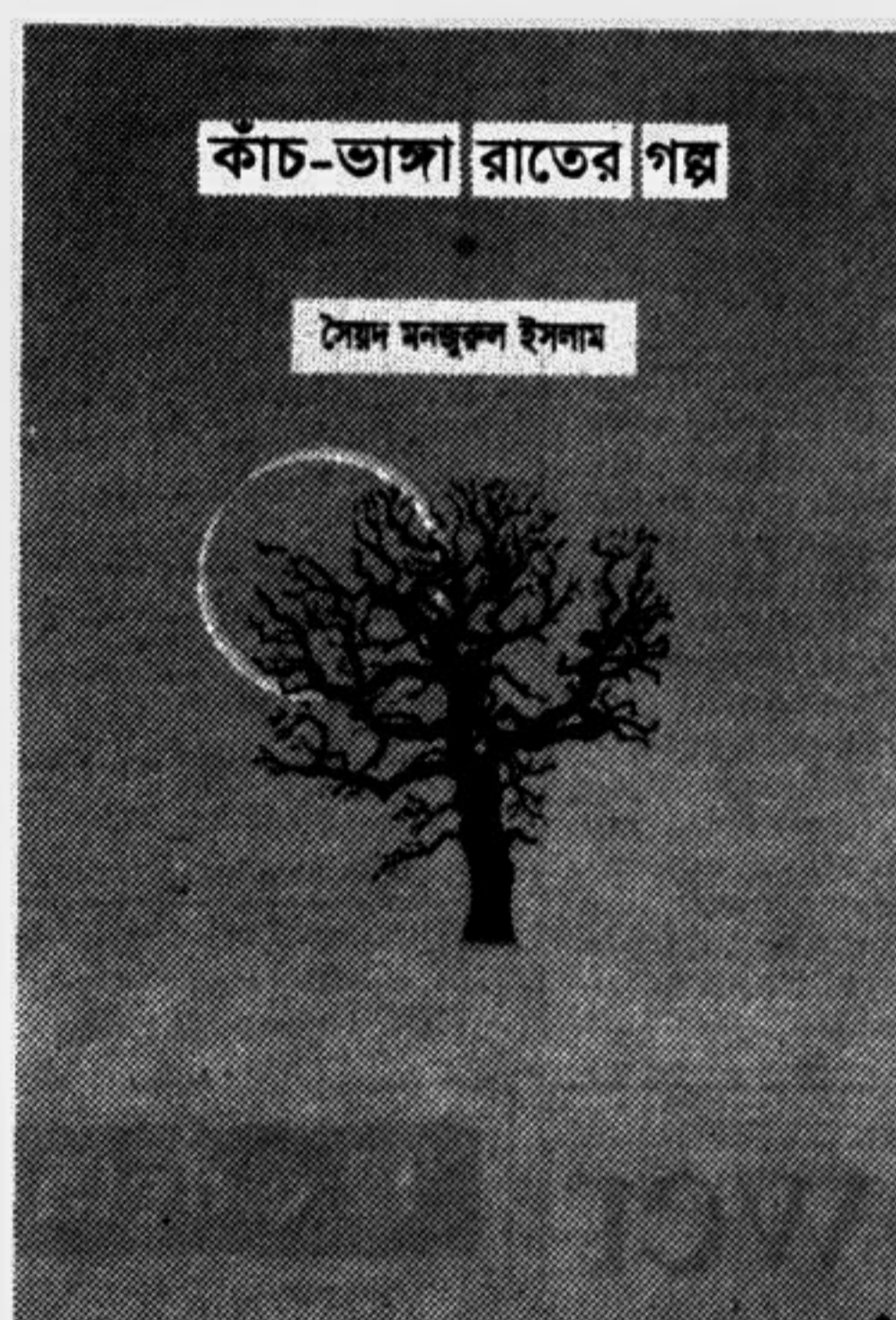
book review

Inner Visions of Human Mind

by Subrata Kumar Das

SYED Manzoorul Islam has already established himself as a stalwart in writing critiques both in Bangla and English language. His observations especially on literary topics, fine arts and aestheticism may spring some sort of envy in any writer writing on likewise things. But how come that 'Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo' is his third collection of short stories? Yes, what he silently does is his stories. 'Swanirbanchito Golpo' came in 1995 under the banner of Prama from Calcutta, in 1996 came 'Thaka Na-thakar Golpo' published from Pragati Prakashani, Dhaka and the book for today's consideration is the third of his short story books.

Whatever is written on the first or last flap of the cover of the book let go unnoticed. Any book local or foreign will take such jargons to attract the buyers. The impression that we attain after reading the book is that about all



Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo (A collection of short stories) Syed Manzoorul Islam Samabesh, Shahbagh, Dhaka Published in February, 1998 Price: Tk 85

Consequently it seems better not to mention the book as a collection of short stories in itself. Then what are they? Nouvelle (Novella or long story) is another most inappropriate word to suit them. Not even they are the by-product short stories of a novelist as we experience in many of the great twentieth century novelists. Because, Mr. Islam wrote no such voluminous novel.

Better, let us impose the responsibility of terming their identity to the readers themselves after having a glance on different features of the write-ups of 'Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo.'

Among the ten at least in 'Ashtra' (Weapon), 'Lash' (Dead body), 'Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo' (The story of a

Glass-breaking Night), 'Paralaukik' (of the next-world), the speaker is a writer/journalist/Professor of English as we may say Syed Manzoorul Islam himself. The story 'Farguson Dinner-walar Golpo' seems also told by himself, though the components of the story were collected actually while he was a class ten student. In another one 'Sahajatri' (co-passenger) a dumb young man is the narrator. No apparent describer is seen in 'Judhajatra', 'Ihakal', 'Tin Chokher Manush' and in 'Prem'. Third-person narrative techniques have been manipulated in them.

The incident of the dead body coming out alive from the coffin box in 'Shahajatri', disappearance of parts of human figure or at last the whole human body in the story 'Paralaukik', or the existence of a back eye in Ripon or his Huzur's head in 'Tin Chokher Manush' are completely based on fictitious foundations. Can they be graded as elements of post-modernity or magic-realism?

All the stories of Syed Manzoorul Islam

impart a feeling to his readers that all of them originally come forth from a wider and larger perspective, only the shortage of space compel them to be shortened. Though it does not mean that they have turned into long short-stories. But it is true a lot many that the author knows, that the reader expects have been consciously curtailed.

As a result what happens is that in all of them we get the plot - the skeleton of a longer and deeper episode - and the aesthetic perfection remain for away - away from the capacity of the reader.

In Islam's story we come across a new dimension. Though not an innovation in foreign literature but in Bangla its use is quite new. For example in the first story 'Ashtra' after some nine lines the narrator says about the protagonist Ponir "How have we known about Ponir? Why, it is our duty to know. As a writer it becomes our responsibility. Otherwise how can we write stories?" Or, in 'Kanch Banga Rater Golpo' "The luck of Aulad Hossain (The father of the

main character) embellishes while working in Parijat. We don't know how it becomes possible. We do not understand trade affairs well. And so we cannot give detail of them. "In 'Paralaukik' once he says 'We are mere story-tellers' (Page-86); or, "But as we were with Rupa (The protagonist) we saw her going to the hall, opening her trunk and cutting her hankies into pieces" in 'Prem' page 119.

'Ashtra' and 'Ihakal' delineate true realities of our surroundings; 'Judhajatra' or 'Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo' portray some inner visions of human mind. They will remain longer fresh in the readers' skull. 'Farguson Dinnerwalar Golpo' is of no less interest as well.

With fine good-looking paper and binding "Kanch Bhanga Rater Golpo" comes from Samabesh. The cover page of the book gives soothing effects to visual organs; though the reader cannot avoid the haunts of hundreds of spelling mistakes.

reflection

Understanding Women

by Mozaffar Hossain

NOW, let us see whether women as a human species can be included in any of the said four basic types. A superficial observation may allure us to group them under choleric type. If they are choleric there is no need to make any poetry on them. In fact, no human being is an ideal type. Types are often crossed and overlapped due to the dynamism of human nature and ever-changing environmental circumstances. But before going for any hasty judgement it is necessary to know something more about Pavlovism.

According to Pavlov, our sense-organs including the whole nervous system are prone to react to the slightest excitement from the external stimulus, viz light, sound, heat, air, smell etc. Each particular type of stimulus produces a particular type of response. This relation between stimulus and response is called the reflex action or reflexes. Take for example, a sudden flash of dazzling light compels us to close our eyes immediately. This happens automatically and mechanically. This mode of behaviour is common to all animal life including human beings. Such reflexes help the living beings to lead their lives and save their progeny.

Thirst, hunger, sex-urge etc. come under this system of reflexes. Pavlov

called it the First Signalling System which is common to all living beings. But in addition to this, man possesses another system which he has earned through a long process of evolution. This is called the Second Signalling System which is more complex than the first one. It is the power of using language in various modes. Man is the unique possessor of this unique assef. The direct visual perception of fish will allure the cat to devour it. But in absence of the object, the very word 'fish' will provoke to react the human being in a number of ways. He may remember the past experience of angling, or he may write an article, or compose a poem on fish. The type of reaction will depend on the past experience of the individual.

All intellectual development depends on this Second Signalling System which again depends on the varied experiences of life. Thus, for Pavlov, all human actions (from the simple work of mending shoes to the most complex job of writing philosophical articles) are chain of reflexes. A successful and efficient creative man is he whose both the signalling systems are balanced. Such a balance is impossible when experiences are limited. This long and short of the signalling systems are not irrelevant in understanding women. Now, let us try to apply this method of judging human personality in understanding women.

It is not impossible now to discern that there is no instinctive limitation

of women to develop their creative faculties. The story of such limitation is a concocted one by the males of our male-dominating society. As a bio-social entity the half of our population has not yet been able to cross the limits of biostage. Our girls, though rank first in public examinations of educational institutions by rote-learning, cannot keep pace with their counterparts in practical life because of innumerable impediments in the way of freedom multiplying with their age-growth day by day. It becomes impossible for them to be creative within the confines of four walls of domestic life. Social do's and don't's make them shrieking and ill-tempered choleric. Women can develop their potentialities and creative

faculties in proportion to the overcoming and lifting of social knots. The freedom of women is essential not only for their own sake. It is also necessary for their counterparts also. A male member of a family wastes much of his time and talent in controlling, curbing and ultimately suppressing the human rights of the female members of his family. Consequently, the chained and segregated female members bereft of the open air, cannot develop their sense of responsibility and balanced personality. Thus they become more emotional than rational. This loss is a great loss for both the parties.

A female member's potentiality is lost and her counterpart misuses it. Let us try to get rid of this bondage.