

fiction

The Back Square

by Mohit Ul Alam

SHE was actually seated on the doorstep, though the door was gone, and she was sobbing wildly. All her burnt furniture was thrown out in the small front yard, and she along with her plight seemed to have somehow remained unattended. All her furniture was baked to a charcoal. And she sat there waiting and sobbing, sobbing and waiting, amidst the ruins of her belongings. The smoke still simmered, and upon a burnt meat-safe, standing on the edge of the yard, Mumtaj spotted a copy of the Holy Quran with pages thickly blackened on the edges but not burned, leaving the centres intact. The air now grew thin as the sun was heating up, and the acrid smell coming from the cowsheds also lessened, the result of fire being doused with water.

And she sat there sobbing. Mumtaj couldn't guess why she was left alone amid the disaster, but his journalistic vein prodded him on for a subject. He walked a few steps toward her for an introduction. She was a young woman

seemingly close to thirty. She was wearing a white sari which matched strongly with her very fair skin. Her face was slightly roundish, but the nose came up shapely, and her moist eyes when she rested them on the approaching photographer looked, well not really looked, but sort of drove an unfamiliar sensation into his being. A welter of feelings streamed up inside his bosom, and he didn't know whether he would use the camera first or talk first. Her swell chest also attracted him, but he didn't particularly notice it.

"The fire?"
Then she narrated a horrid story — in broken phrases smudged with her sobbing — of how the fire had started from one of the tea-shops where an electric cable short-circuited and caused the fire. Mumtaj heard the same story before — everybody seemed to know it; and he thought he would find out the truth later. More urgently he felt he would listen to the plight of this woman first.

She sat amidst the ruins under the stark blazing sun. The wind was low, but it carried the burnt smell from everywhere. She was fair, almost white,

and against the high bright sun, she almost dazzled. Mumtaj pondered why she was alone all like that!

She read his eyes, pulled the border of the sari over her shoulder, and said, "I stay with my cousin, but she is lucky, because she went to see her mother in Rangpur."

"Are you from Rangpur, then?"
"We all are. We came here during Ershad's time. He said in a meeting that Chittagong was a very rich place, we would have no problem if we came here."

She had a pretty face, her eyes glinted in experience born out of hazards of migration. A suffering woman was Mumtaj's ideal.

Her nose was pointed, and, while talking, her rosy lips danced beneath it as she looked up several times at Mumtaj. Thin creases drew upon the lips like the design on an orange slice.

Her arms couldn't be seen, but Mumtaj sensed their soft presence under the sari. Her hands looked a little thick near the elbow betraying her age camouflaged by her lovely face.

Mumtaj unstrapped his camera again, adjusted his angle, and pressed

the shutter quickly overriding her mumbling protest.

"Where would she go?"
She gave him the location of the 'busti' where she would spend the days before the present landowner rebuilt her house.

The next morning Mumtaj's report was featured in many newspapers of the town, and one newspaper having particular faith in Mumtaj's talent printed her picture at the centre of the front page, a six by four large blow-up. He stuck a few copies under his arm as one carries a pet hen, but he didn't find her in the 'busti' where she said she would be. It had him in the soup for a moment, but having learnt his trade well, he was adamant to find her out. The Rangpur connection worked. She started living with a family from Rangpur in a busti on the other side of the railroad. The busti was actually farther than that, across a brook, against a hillock. While journeying there Mumtaj's journalistic mind wondered how cleanly it was separated from the city! He contemplated writing a feature on the people of the busti, the males working as rickshaw-pullers and the females as house-maids.

They, her folk, greeted him with overjoyed enthusiasm, as if Sabiha's picture was printed not as a victim of the fire, but as a budding actress. Mumtaj was a little unnerved, though he hid his emotion. He was not sure whether he would compromise and accept their response as a recognition of his work, or whether he would say to them that they should not misread his intention. The children of the area had already started a wild boisterous procession carrying in the front a newspaper page in which Sabiha's picture was printed.

His reservation submitted itself to a certain sense of pleasure. The formation of the houses here was the same as in other busties: thatched houses erected in rows. Five to six rows of houses stood on parallel lines at the foot of the hillock. They strangely called it the Burmese Colony. He was soon ushered into a house inside which he found a clay floor, recently overlaid by hand with a fresh coat of clay. The movement of the hand that swept the floor produced a series of rainbow-shaped graphs on the floor. Mumtaj inhaled the dry smell of the clay. There was a neat freshness about the house.

The thatched walls of the house were pasted with old copies of newspapers. A door, hung with a long white drapery, led to the back room. From behind the curtain some women were watching him and giggling. In the life of the busti women veil has no place when they work outside, but inside their houses they are the traditional women. The men had already told him Sabiha was living in that house. There was obviously some mild jostling going on behind the curtain, and a greater effort from one of them to suppress it. Mumtaj suddenly felt like a lover who had entered his would be bride's house. He surveyed the wall papers that covered the thatched partition, his own newspaper peeping at many places. The men who accompanied him inside the house brought him a chair and sat themselves on the floor at a respectable distance. In their posture, however, Mumtaj felt as if they were reconstructing a scene from the weekend drama of BTV, where low people are made to sit on the ground.

The jostling ended but a fresh crackling of laughter came out from the women.

To be continued

profile

Anthony Burgess : A Prolific Writer of Great Merit

by A S M Nurunnabi

ANTHONY Burgess was an enormously prolific writer with more than 50 books to his credit. While working as a colonial education officer in Borneo and Malaya, he was told at the age of 42 that he had an inoperable brain tumour and had only a year to live. Though he began writing stories earlier, the looming prospect of death made him to take writing seriously and at speed producing a large harvest of writing. During a span of thirty years, his writings included novels, short stories, autobiography, criticism, books on language, verse, translations, children's stories, screenplays and an enormous amount of journalism. He tried to keep to a routine of writing a thousand words a day, every-

day, and regarded writing as a "trade like anything else, not some precious rite."

Burgess had written in almost every conceivable style and sub-genre. His subject matter stretched back into history and forward into a fantasised future. Geographically, too, his range was very wide. Among the terms that have been applied to his writing are prodigious, cerebral, inventive, verbally dazzling, witty, ironic, and gutsy. He lived abroad and all his literary honours had been bestowed upon him outside England. There was, however, a residual feeling that he was perhaps too popular, too entertaining to be fully acceptable to the literary establishment in England.

The key to some of this feeling and to much of his writing lay in his background. Burgess contended that his upbringing as a partially Irish Roman

Catholic in Manchester gave him a permanent sense of being different, possibly displaced, with an identity crisis. Certain Irish writers, and in particular Joyce on whom he had written extensively, were a major influence on Burgess, most clearly in creating that sense of the sanctity and resources of language which is so marked a characteristic of his work. Equally, it is arguable that the sense of being an "Anglo-Irishman" — hovering uncertainly between two cultures, two sets of allegiances, two identities but capable of being enriched by the possibilities of both — had influenced the type of protagonist created by Burgess. His heroes are often outsiders, or expatriates, out of touch with the society around them, but capable of a sympathetic absorption of the better points of other cultures.

Much of Burgess's work is autobiographical in the sense that his heroes receive aspects of his own experiences. This autobiographical element had two consequences. First, it led to an obsessive sense of recapitulation, of the creation, in no matter how exotic the spatial or temporal background, of a familiar Burgess landscape in which themes and situations of alienation, and entrapment, and escape are constantly re-embodied. Second, it had the effect of "humanising" the characters who might otherwise exist in a context that is too linguistically self-conscious, that, even at times, manifests a degree of showing-off typical of the emotionally deprived but scholastically precocious child. One of the great sources of comedy in Burgess's work is precisely the contrast between the failed, shambling, flawed,

inept characters who inhabit his universe and the brilliant, flawless language in which their physical and emotional and low bodily functions are described.

It is clear that Burgess was, in spite of his popularity, concerned throughout the whole corpus of his work with fundamental questions of good and evil, original sin and innocence, guilt and responsibility. "It is very hard to get away from the Catholic thing" said Burgess, but it is clear that he had not tried to do so. Burgess created characters who are unwilling to accept that the "universal questions" are no longer valid or that the problem of meaning has been solved by any "ism" or system currently prevailing.

In many of his fictions Burgess examined, skeptically, the claim of mytholog-

ical or scientific systems to embody truth. He, however, believed that there is a truth to be embodied, even if it is that the devil created the world. As he said himself, "the God my religious upbringing forced upon me was a God wholly dedicated to doing me harm... a big vindictive invisibility." Nevertheless, it was Burgess's continuing concern with questions such as the relationship, between God, man and society which provided the main impetus for his work and which led, in spite of his experimentation with structuralism, to the continuing belief that truth can be embodied in fiction and the novel remains a viable and a prophetic form.

His outstanding work includes the following titles: (i) A Clockwork Orange, (ii) Earthly Powers, (iii) Any old Iron, (iv) The Devil's Mode, among others. ■

poems

The Rebel

by Nazrul Islam

Translated by Md Mahfuz Ali

Say hero —
Say my head, soars sky-high,
outpeaking the sharp, slender pinnacle of the
Himalayas blanketed with drifts of snow,
throwing a presumptuous glance at its servile-stooping position.

Say hero —
Say cleaving with the heaviest thud the enigmatic firmament of the great universe,
transcending and out-flanking the moon, sun, stars, planets,
encroaching upon an interminable edge of the earth, heaven, city of the infernal regions,
bisecting sacrilegiously the ornately sculpted throne of God spangled with celestial
charm and beauty.

I have been explosively an ever-staggering blow to the supreme being of
the world!
on my forehead there glows the damned god with the royal mark of kingship blessed
by the trail-blazing goddess of victory!

Say hero —
Since time immemorial I am puffed up with my head pointing straight upward.

I am unbridled ever since, straddling the elements of
braggadocio, cruelty and the inconceivable devilish-initiation of the great
cataclysm maker, Shiva,
growing out-herod, studded, steely and robust
like the overwhelming force of cyclone and arms of annihilation,
spawning the spirit of stoking up a universal panic,

with the venomous germination of an imprecation of the cosmos,
unyoked am I
smashing everything to pieces.
Shaking myself out of the ideological strait jacket of order,
I come to be impregnated with the sense of disorder
and become laden with the charges of treading on the shackles, bondage, stilted
rules-regulation so far!

And of the strangulation of the stifling-stiffened rigidity of any law.
Standing transfixed under an image of a loaded ship scuttled by me, I become "Bhima".
And I detonate fiercely, shelling and bombarding
with the bursting flame and intensity of a torpedo and a floating mine!
I am Shiva, growing analogous stormily and violently to the spasmodic nor'wester
sweeping along in the manner of a scatterer.

The rebel am I, I am stigmatized as the rebellious offspring,
emerging out of the womb of the world.

Say hero —
My head is held up forever.
Blending into the stormy rain, whirl wind
I explode into a violent force, thereby
grinding infuriatingly whatever I confront
in my spinning round and moving across the way.
Blowing into a rip-roaring rhythmic dance maniac
I become enamoured of skipping and roving round
tunefully of my own lilting musical accord, breathing out the free joyous spirit of life,

swinging from hambier to scywanought to heendoll.

With my spirit breathing out restless vivacity,
I am inclined to stampede and scamper off in my movement.
Getting into the swing of a slackening in my stride
megalomaniacally.

I come to be electrified by a surprising blow
in the midst of my voyage.
And I keep on jumping up with jerks three times.
Assimilating into the unsteady "Heendoll"
graced with both masculine and feminine charm.

I, dear brother
let my free, spontaneous impulse triumph over me
whenever my mind craves for anything.
Necking with enemy and scuffling with death in a skirmish,
I boil over into direct and violent action
to a semblance of the lunatic fringe, or of a cyclone.
A killer epidemic am I, spreading out in every direction of
the earth

and
bombarding all with apprehension unbearably and unabatedly.
The slayer am I, inspiring and bolstering terror and sabotage
under my jackboot.

Curious am I, forever with a chummy-hospitable warm heart.

Say hero —
Since time immemorial, I am puffed up with my head
pointing straight upward.

With an ever-emboldened, unrestrained and untrammelled demeanour,
hardened by a streak of intractability,
I am unstrung,
broad-bosomed with overflowing frivolous enchantment
in the likeness of my favourite mug,
brimming up with wine ceaselessly.

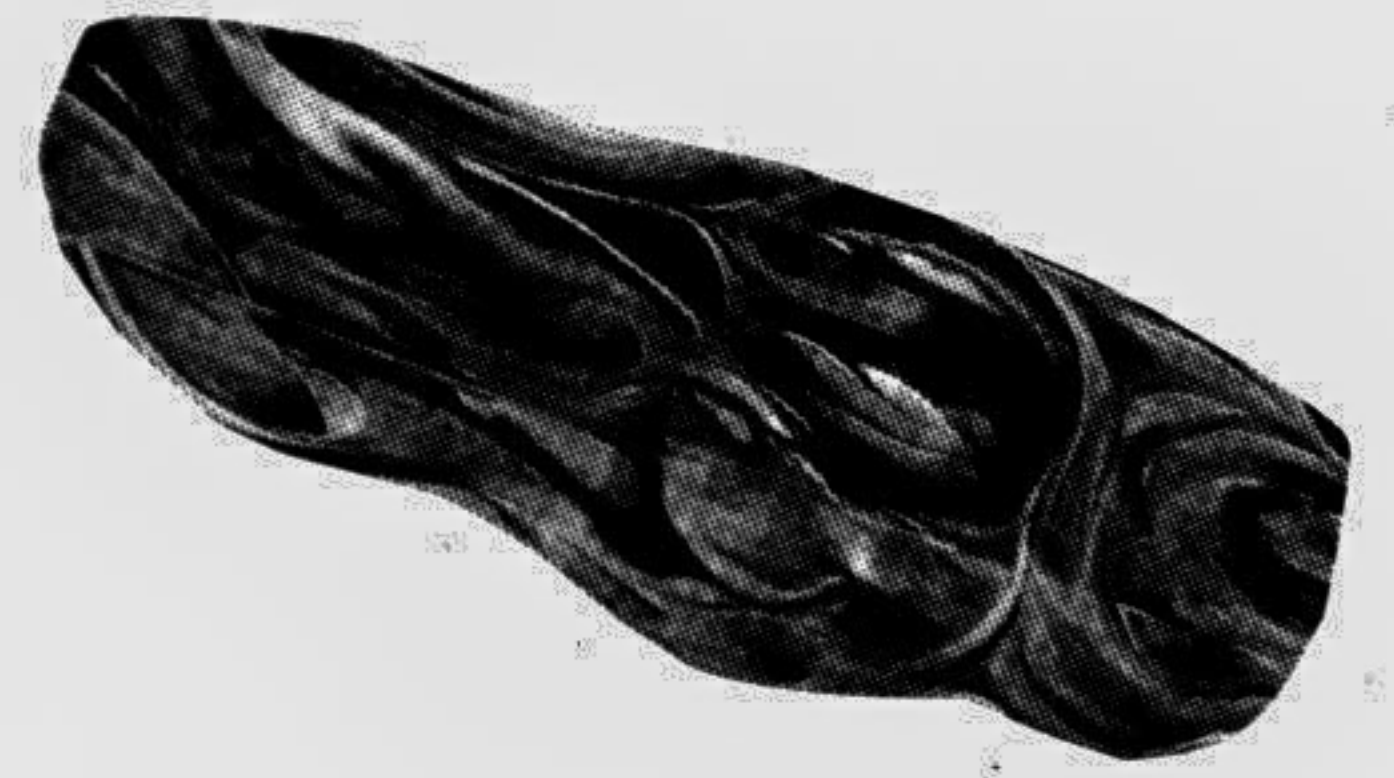
Glowing with the flame of the fire for an oblation
I mould and furnish myself with the sacramental craftsmanship
Of the sacrificer offering up fire to God.

I am a practiser of art being indoctrinated into being identified
with sacrificial fire, the sacrificial priest and "Agni".
Enshrining the essence of creation as well as destruction
in the innermost recess of my mind,

I hack my way and surge through human locality, crematorium
and being emblazoned with an emblem of annihilation, I
smother the vile contagion of night.

I, a lineal descendant of Indra's family line,
keep the moon in the grip of my hands and lay the cumbersome,
scorching sun over my shoulder.
I bustle with joy melodically and jubilantly,
holding a bent-bamboo flute in one of my hands and
the battle sword in another.
I am Nilakantha (Mahadeva)

taking and drinking a draught of deadly poison,
in undertaking the churning of the sea of milk.
In the shape of the morbid, dry tangled locks of "Bom", ruffling
up high and, yet higher and licking the sky,
I appear receiving the falling Ganga.
I have bloomed into a votary of goodness combating for it.
I am the prince, matchless in my graceful lustrous suit



out-shinning ochre blazing with the shades of yellowish-orange
or red colour.

I am Beduin, I am Chengish,
Never do I fling down my head wontedly in the posture of a
suppliant before any one save me.

The thunder am I, I am Shiva's wind-instrument, rumbling out
the mystic verse "OM".
I come to be attuned with the menacing blare of "Ishrafil's" horn.
Shaping up myself with "Vishnu's" discuss & his enormous conch,
I boom out the mystic verse "Om Shantee, Om Shantee."
I am armed with Shiva's "Pinak" (bow), trident and tabor
for infliction of divine punishment.
The fiery disciple of Bishamittra am I, bursting into the flame of
conflagration,

rolling through and consuming the whole universe.
I am animated with the beams of a
guffaw of a demystified, open-hearted laughter,
begetting an outpouring of joy — stuffed with the consequences
of a universal panic running contrary to the essence of creation.
I come to be the terrible seize of "Rahu"
with radiation of heat from twelve suns, spurring a universal
holocaust.

Falling into a tranquil state, sometime with the serenity of mind
and rocking the boat, sometimes
I have grown despotic.
The blood-thirsty murderous youth am I,
pulling down the sun from its orbit
and

deflating the presumptuous decree of divine Providence.
Coupling with the gust of wind, continuous murmur of the sea,
I have become resplendent with a glowing surface.

And I swing from the surging rush of water to the tuneful lap
of the waves.

Throwing the graceful charm of the bondless maiden's braid over me,
I come to be glamorous and illuminated
by the impressive radiance of a girl's eyes.
I am imbued with the sinless, white passion of the dribbling
dart of love.