



poetry

# Al-Mahmud — A Poet of Nature and Love

by A Z M Haider

**A**L-Mahmud is without doubt a major poet of Bangladesh. He is indisputably one of the three principal poets of fifties and sixties in this country. His other contemporaries are Shamsur Rahman and Fazal Shahabuddin. Shahid Kadri, who is now lost in wilderness, is also equated with them.

Hailing from a sleeping hamlet situated on the bank of quietly flowing river, Al-Mahmud came to the busy metropolitan city of Dhaka in early fifties when he was in his teens. He spent his early boyhood in the placid rural surrounding of Bangladesh strolling all alone in paddy fields stretching to the distant horizon, sitting by a river bend to watch in the crimson glow of the setting sun lurks flying to an unknown destination or a boatman singing *bhatiali*. As a boy he used to be stirred to his depth by the poignant strain of *baul's* song gliding into his ears from a dim distance. His sensitive soul used to be thrilled with inexplicable rapture at the sight of village, belles plodding their weary ways homeward or a cowboy playing flute in a silhouette under the balmy shade of a banyan tree in a distant field. All these enchanting sights and sounds made an indelible imprint on his sensitive soul struggling for an outburst in the shape of copious rains of poetry. From his early boyhood his mind used to remain overcast with cloud. One day a thunderous roar ripped that cloud and it started raining down profusely in the shape of poetry. His first poem was published by a Calcutta daily called *Satyajug*. The

poet was then hardly 14. After publication of that poem Calcutta dailies and journals kept publishing his poems.

In early fifties Al-Mahmud, as was stated earlier, left his village home at Brahmanbaria and came to Dhaka which by then sprang into an alternative hub of literary activities in the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after partition in 1947. Very soon by sheer strength of his poetic talent he carved out a niche for himself in the literary world of this country. His vertical rise to fame in the literary world of the then East Pakistan was breathtakingly dramatic and soon he came to be identified with three other major poets of the fifties and sixties, Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin and Shahid Kadri.

An avid reader of the classics of Bengali literature, Al-Mahmud had access to the works of Tagore and Nazrul Islam very early in life and was greatly influenced by these great masters of Bengali poetry. Like poets of his generation, Al-Mahmud was initiated into modern trend of western poetry through translations of the French poet Bodelaire, German poets like Rilke and Hedalin by Buddhadev Basu. In fact, Buddhadev Basu's translation served to open up before him a new world of poetry rich in form, technique, style, content and poetic experiences. Besides, like Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Shahid Kadri and other poets of fifties in Bangladesh, Al-Mahmud was also immensely influenced by the poets of thirties — Jibanananda Das, Buddhadev Basu, Bishnu Dey, Amiya Chakraborty, Sudhin Dutta etc. who broke away with the all-pervasive Tagorian spell and introduced modernity, as understood in western literature, in Bengali poetry. In

fact, the Bengali poets of thirties opened the gateway to let in refreshing breeze from the west to enrich Bengali poetry by its fragrance, freshness and a wealth of new poetic experiences. Al-Mahmud, like other poets of his generation, was greatly influenced by poets of thirties. But he was not completely overpowered by their highly sophisticated western elitist outlook on life and literature. He retained his individual identity as a poet without denying his indebtedness to them. Al-Mahmud was too deeply ingrained in the soil and surroundings, native feelings and emotions, pride and prejudices to be swept away by any extraneous influence.

Since Al-Mahmud had his breeding in rural Bangladesh, his mental and emotive experience remained deeply rooted to his setting and milieu. The bard is so inextricably linked with his rural surrounding and its scenic beauty that even now at the twilight years of his life he has not been able to extricate himself from its magic spell which has caused a flowing river of abiding love for nature in the innermost depth of his heart.

Al-Mahmud's works can be classified into three distinct categories, the first category dealing with his deep passion for nature, women and his country, the second one dealing with the war of liberation and resurgent Bengali nationalism and the third one with the sublime metaphysical spirit which helps establish a communion between him and the infinite being which regulates the entire cosmic system.

In the fifties and sixties when Al-Mahmud was in the prime of his youth, he was carried away by romantic emo-

tion. The sailing cloud, smiling flowers, flowing rivers, rustling leaves, colour and fragrance of spring, mellow fruitfulness of summer, cloudless blue sky of autumn, murmuring melancholy of grey winter used to cause ferment in the depth of his soul and he used to pour forth his emotional stirrings in the exquisite lines of his poetry. He is so passionately attached to the land of his origin that he finds it inordinately difficult to stay away from it. The following lines clearly manifest his deep feelings for his motherland:

*Where shall we go  
How long can we go  
There is a river, a paddy field and a hill behind  
The breeze smacks of salt  
Larks in innumerable pairs fly  
In southern sky with their wet feathers flapping*

*Have we reached the realm of rains?  
A peaceful habitation in the waves  
Beels and canals are full to the brim.*  
At this stage in life the poet's heart remained filled with intense amorous feeling. He was then in love which thrilled him to the depth of his being. But his love is not shorn of eroticism. The physical charm of women has a tremendous appeal to the poet. Side by side with sensuous appeal of women's physical form that fires the poet's imagination, he finds in her a doting mother, an affectionate sister and a loving daughter to whom one can turn back for solace in sorrow, comfort and consolation in times of crisis.

The two exquisite poems quoted below exemplify Al-Mahmud's concept of love and women:

*If you give me love, I shall give you my kiss*



*As I know no trickery, I have not learnt any trade*

*If you give body, you will get it in return*

*Sweetheart, I have no greater capital than the body*

*by which I can buy ornaments for you*

*If you undress yourself, you will notice in me a raw man*

*Without any cover.*

*If you take a fruit of the forbidden tree, give me one*

*Knowingly or unknowingly you and I will belong to each other eternally.*

*I am not defeated, a poet shall never suffer defeat.*

*Although I am badly hurt  
My veins and arteries are burning in*

pain.

*Sometime you look like a river in the morning*

*Sometime like a river in the evening*

*The sun sets at a distant hamlet*

*Nature appears wrapped in mysterious glow of the setting sun*

*I see that face bending in supplication.*

Thus Al-Mahmud's love poems have not only eroticism, but also intense thrill of ecstasy and excitement. His contemporary, Fazal Shahabuddin's love poems contain much stronger erotic passion. Fazal's delineation of women's body form is so fervidly passionate and of such high literary excellence that it fires one's imagination with acute erotic sensation. In Al-Mahmud's poetry women have emerged as mother, sister and daughter to whom one can fall back for comfort and consolation in times of crisis. This aspect of women's personality is absent in Fazal's poetry.

What is striking about Al-Mahmud's earlier poems is that there is a fine strand running through his love poems as well as those dealing with nature and the country. In these poems one can notice a strain representing the presence of an infinite force which regulates the whole life system. One can distinctly notice that regulatory force in love and women as conceived by the poet. Even the nature as portrayed by the poet expresses in diverse forms the manifestation of that infinite force. Thus Al-Mahmud's earlier poems, regardless of their thematic diversity, are like well-knit beads in a chain.

(To be continued)

poem

## The Earth

by Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Md Mahfuz Ali

Oh earth, let my tributaries have free access to your bosom agreeably,  
Today when as a token of last respect  
I prostrate myself obsequiously and reverentially  
Beneath the altar of dusky evening hour.  
Thou art greatly valiant; Thou hast deservedly kept the heroes at your disposal.  
The shifting sands of your position is reversibly exposed to a mood,  
Fluctuating from softness to rigidity.  
And thy nature issues out of the mixture of masculinity and femininity.  
Thou keep on rocking human life with unendurable feuds.  
Thy art manifests itself in the act of brimming up a mug  
With nectar with your right hand,  
And there blazes up the spirit of demolition in you  
To smash the pot to pieces with left hand.  
Letting the thread of utter sarcasm reverberate and sweep across  
Your playground you render the life of a hero  
Worthy of unattainable pride and glory  
When he smoothes his path-way with the confirmation  
Of his every right and accessibility to noble life.  
Thy art sheds down a shower of pricy honour  
Upon the superior, feeling on solicitude for objects of mercy.  
Struggles of every moment, thou hast hidden in your trees,  
So, fruits or crops, it bear earn the garland of your victory.  
Thy battlefield far from offering excuse and being intoxicated  
With the spirit of fighting diffuses itself in land and water,  
Wherein before the dance of death is declared the news of victory,  
Gushing out from the heart of the conqueror.  
Thy cruelty is an emblem of the victorious ensign of human civilization.  
If the blunder ensues, the price is to be repaid through extermination of lives.  
With the pervasive influence of the pre-formed faculties of monster,  
Serving to illuminate his irrepressible and unconquerable force

Laying down the bedspread that is  
Set ablaze with the shades of green  
The foster-mother of the living squatted down on it.  
The morn's smile in an upright standing position flooded the pinnacle  
Of eastern mountain with an outpouring of streaks of light.  
The dusk's descent on the western sea-shore came about  
With an emblem of peace emblazoned on head.  
The uncontrollable and unmanageable monster with the shackles  
Fastened round his wrists and ankles sobered up.  
Curbing that bestial and demonic spirit.  
Yet, your History keeps clinging to the essence of your primordial barbarity.  
In the system of order, he abruptly spawns chaos and confusion  
Whose venomous vapour oozes out of the black pit of your nature  
Sinuously all on a sudden.  
His state of paranoia keeps running through your artery.  
During the courses of day and night, the mystical spells of gods peal



Through sky, air and forests in a grave, sonorous, rumbling voice,  
Yet from the infernal region of your bosom the half-bred snaky monster  
Rears its hood up in consequence of which  
Your heaviest blows fall upon your own creatures.  
Laying waste the acts of creation  
Originating from your craftsmanship.  
Stooping myself at your footstool in auspicious and inauspicious moments  
I will dedicatedly bestow tributaries of my insulted life  
Blazing with the traces of wound.  
And my givings-out from my true-meant design will objectify it  
Towards your ocean of greatness and glory.  
My sense cannot but yield me forth to the taste  
Of your ground under which the concealed motion of the  
Immensity of life and death keeps on boiling and bubbling.  
And I enshrine it in my consciousness  
With the whole of body as well as heart today.  
The hidden bodies of many men of different ages  
That came to be precluded from being accounted  
Lie accumulated in dust;

I myself too, leave behind a few handful of dust heaping the last end  
Of what constitutes my happiness and distress  
In the tranquilly existing layer of dust  
Which swallows up name, shape and all identities  
Oh, earth, thou become closed within the still and static blockade  
And fade into patches of clouds.  
Oh earth, thou become rapt in deep, silent mediation upon the peak of mountain  
And thou keep vigilant unwearied on the vast expanses of ocean,  
With the murmuring noise of running blue water.  
Thou become full of rice and beautiful,  
Thou become afflicted with the plague of starvation and thou become formidable.  
On one hand, half-ripe and half-green paddy abounds in your crop-field  
Wherein the morning sun advancing its burning eye  
Let's dank dew drops lose moisture in its shedding light  
And wherein the fading sun keeps this untold message  
Ringing in the swinging movement of green crops "I am delighted"  
On the other hand, there gleams forth the love dance of illusion  
Inside the scattered skeletons of animals.  
In your panicky, waterless, fruitless, pale deserted land.  
In "vaishakha" my eyes have been caught by the glimmering spectacle

Of your brewing storm which in the likeness of a black hawk  
Spins round and moves across the way  
To invade that horizontal line surcharge with lightning.  
The whole sky roared out as if it had been a lion,  
Spreading out its mane and making branches of trees,  
Swing in a scattered form with the lash of its tail.  
Suddenly, the large tree tumbled on dust with the face downward.  
Roofs of ramshackle hovels like the chain breaking, imprisoned dacoits  
Sweep along in the direction of wind.  
Again in "Falgoon", I have discerned you  
Sending out a stream of slight sultry air letting  
The soliloquy on separation and unification of love fly out  
In the atmosphere, pervaded by the aroma of mango's buds.  
A mass of bubbles on the upper surface  
Of divine wine frothed over a lunar-mug.  
The rustling of the forest growing impatient since the wind  
Whizzes audaciously, turns to its sudden, noisy surge.

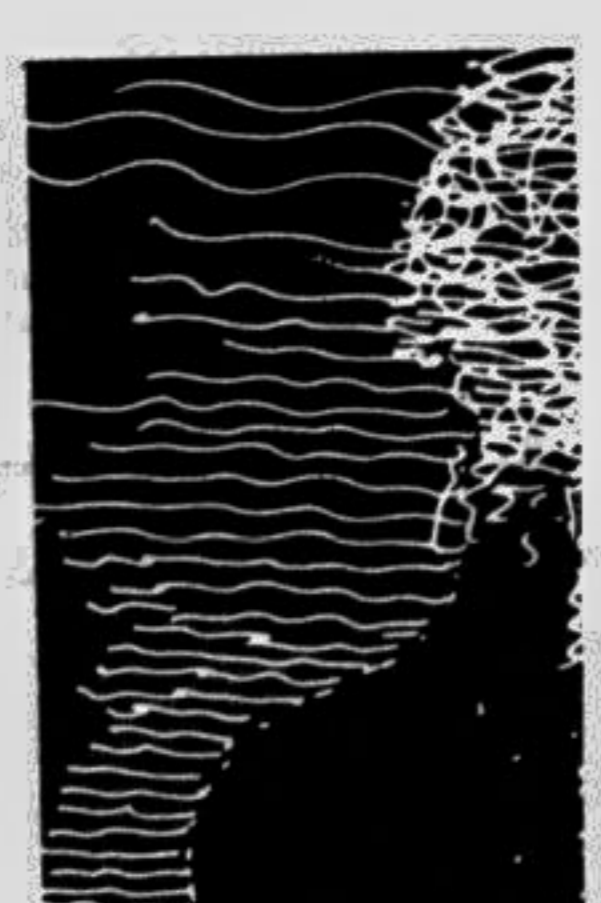
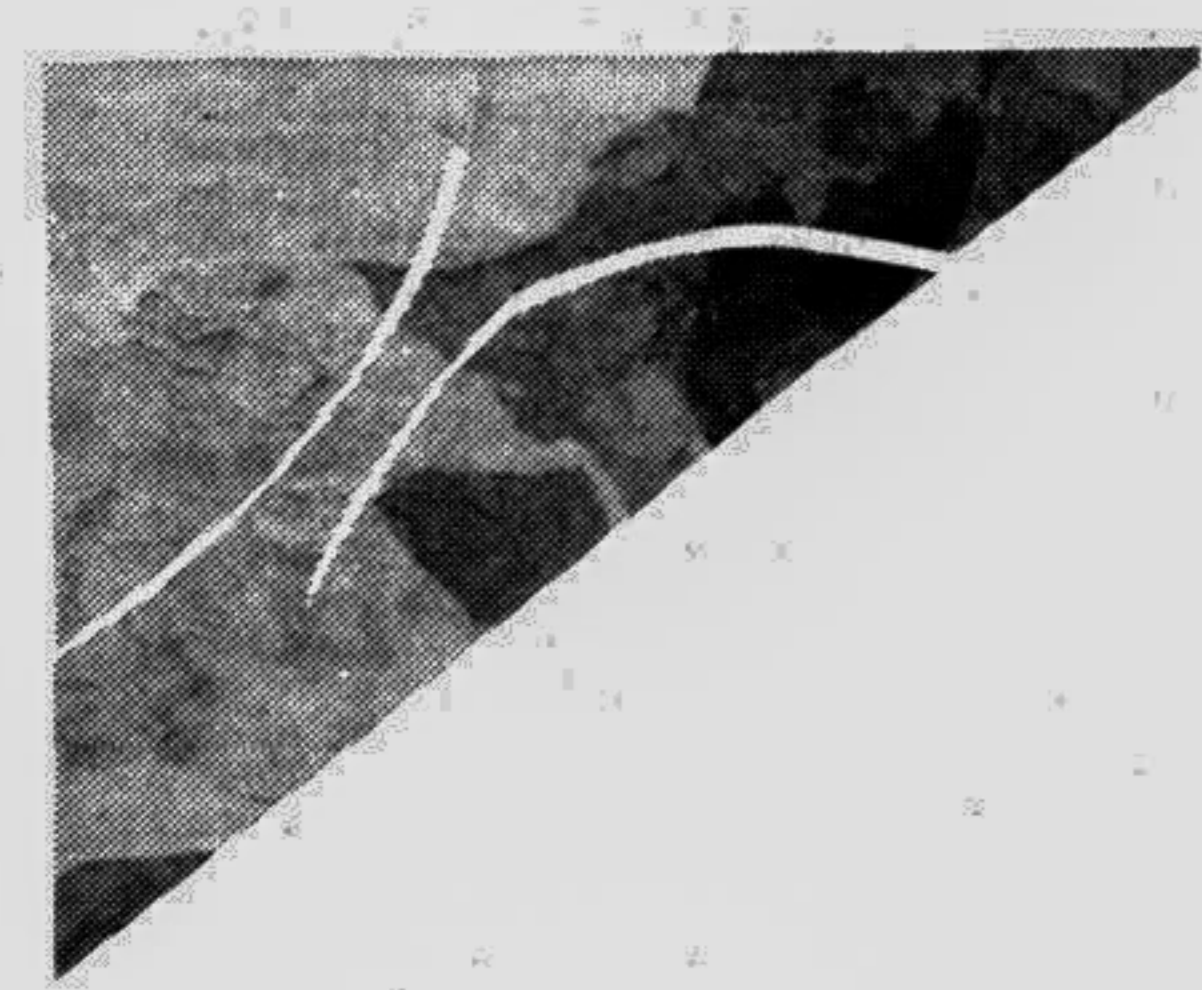
Oh earth,  
Thou art agreeable and pleasing, thou art cruel,  
Thou art old, thou art every day's newlity.  
Out of the sacrificial fire's womb of creation of the undiscovered origin  
You emerged at the initial phase of that past dawn  
When the number-crunching was at its starting point.  
And you on the pathway to your shrine diffused the remainder  
Of what impregnates the concealed meaning of  
Hundreds of courses of discontinued history.  
Divorcing your mind from the burden of pain thou let  
The garbage of your creation slide into different levels of oblivion.

Oh foster-mother of the living, thou hast  
Spurred our upbringing in small cages served in your fragmentary period  
Wherein all our tactics and power become circumscribed  
And all glory fades into nothingness.

Today, I don't stage myself before your eyes being infatuated  
With the alluring prospects of life on demand.  
For the sake of garlands of days and nights I have



Strung together, situating myself in my sitting, yogi position for so long a period  
I will not permit myself to succumb to the demand of immortality.  
In a small space of time amounting to a fraction of myriads  
Of twinkles that get wanted to the act of closing and opening  
During your rotation round the sun for millions of billions of years  
If I grow into an advanced state of awareness  
Of a posture of yogi with an exact assessment  
And if I triumph over any fruitful fragmentary part of life with boundless sorrows,  
Then you will imprint my forehead with a mark of  
Your soil (sandal-paste) as a symbol of religious sect.  
The symbolic imprint on my forehead will fade away  
From eyesight on that night when  
All signs will blend into the enigmatic, undiscovered world.  
Oh indifferent earth,  
Ere thou hasten the haste-post-haste  
Banishment of my existence from your memory's gallery  
I will bestow my tributaries upon your mercile stool.



At the primeval stage of your history  
He was indoctrinated into being identified with the senseless, harsh exercise  
Of the instruments of cruelty, straddling the elements of barbarity and foolhardy.  
And the structure of his fingers surfaced with the marks of art and unpregnant obesity  
And became strained from the fair and exact use of art and tactics.  
Armed with a hotch-potch of bludgeons and pestles  
He helter skelter turned a range of mountains and oceans topsy-turvy  
And fuelled nightmares, letting the hot, bright flames  
Of fire and vapour spread out and roll across the sky.  
His overweening, dictatorial position to be retentive to the sovereignty  
Over the inanimate nature gained momentum invigoratively,  
Going unchallenged and unbeaten with none to flourish and pose a threat  
To his celebrated lordship.  
Steaming up the feelings of his blind envy towards life.  
At a later age, there appeared gods from whose mouth  
The mystical spell blasted out to keep a rein on the monsters,  
Puncturing pride of the inanimate nature.