

essay

## Two English Allusions in Rashid Karim's *Prem Ekti Lal Golap*

by Quazi Mostain Billah

**R**ASHID Karim, one of our outstanding novelists, celebrated his 74th birthday this year. He is indisposed and according to reports published on the eve of his last birthday is not an active writer anymore. I know him only through his writing. Seven or eight years ago I tried to see him, but the request for an appointment was politely turned down. He told me over telephone that he did not meet strangers on account of his indisposition. However, I was not upset by his refusal to grant me an interview. On the contrary, it confirmed the picture of his personality that I had formed from reading his works. Rashid is often cited as a great novelist, and genuinely so. His greatness, in my view, rests partially in his diligent search for perfection in art. When he refused to see me, I concluded that similar regard for perfection about his own person might have discouraged him from meeting a stranger. There are things about us, particularly our infirmities, which we find difficult to own. I think Rashid, a perfectionist in art and also one in life and extra sensitive to his recently developed frailty, in refusing to see me tried, if possible, to spare himself the embarrassment of meeting a stranger in his present indisposition.

However, the purpose that drove me to meet him merited an interview. I wanted to have his permission for a planned film based on his novel *Prem Ekti Lal Golap (Love is a Red Rose)* (1978). Anyway, that story is immaterial here. I made several drafts of a screenplay and then abandoned the project for want of funds. Later Bangladesh TV dramatised my adaptation of the novel as a telly play, but the work was poorly reviewed. One reviewer went to the extent of suggesting that I had failed to understand the novel. This is not the place to demonstrate my understanding of the novel. I think the novel is a good one and, apart from other things, is a fine reworking of the game of deception that often a husband and a wife resort to playing between them. In working out his theme Rashid, in my view, has quite subtly alluded to Robert Burns' lyric 'My love is like a red rose' and Shake-

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speare's *Othello*. *Prem Ekti Lal Golap*, like his other works, commends itself for its plot, characterisation and drama, but I have concerned myself with a side of Rashid that has not received much attention, particularly his exploration of literary allusions. I think he is a well and widely read writer and his writing has been modified by his contact with world literature. Here I have tried to show how Rashid has enriched the theme of the novel by making effective allusion to two works identified before. I have no positive proof that Rashid meant to allude to them, but the resemblance between Rashid's supposed allusions and their sources is difficult to miss. In the absence of any proof I have founded my argument that Rashid used these allusions on the unmistakable similarity between certain things in his work and what I have called his allusions.

The title itself 'Love is a red rose' reminds one of the famous love lyric by Robert Burns. But Rashid does not simply restrict himself to borrowing the telltale line or thought either. His purposes carry him further. In fact, he has used it to an end, which is contrapuntal to the general spirit of the Burns poem. Burns' poem is a straight lyric that celebrates the beauty of live and the beloved, but Rashid has given the theme an ironic twist. Yes, love is a red rose, but for more reasons than one. Burns sang of the ravishing beauty of the rose to convey his euphoria about love whereas, Rashid compares love to a red rose to get across the complex feeling that both pain and pleasure are juxtaposed in love. In my view, he has chosen the rose symbolism more for this ironic significance than for the simple and direct ones that one finds while reading the Burns poem. The rose to Rashid is

red not only because of its ravishing colour, but it is so because it is tinged with the blood of aching hearts. The point will become clearer if we look at the development in the relationship between Umar, the husband, and Ranu, the wife, in the novel *Prem Ekti Lal Golap*.

Ranu and Umar married out of love and their marital bliss continued till Umar's boss Sufi, a dandy and an arch seducer fell for Ranu. She is an extremely attractive woman, and took Sufi's attentions as well deserved compliments to her beauty. They rather satisfied her vanity, and she viewed her liaison with Sufi as a frivolous sport with a smart, attractive and financially powerful man. At the same time she was fully aware of Umar's disapproval of the relationship and the pain it caused him. Gradually the relationship instilled in her a sense of independence and as days went by she felt so empowered by her newly acquired independence that she found it too valuable to surrender either for the love of her husband or the security of home. Her attraction for Sufi grew stronger with time. Moreover, she derived a kind of oblique sexual pleasure by sharing some of her personal things with an outsider. The masked sexuality of the relationship might have made it more intoxicating. Yet, there was a limit in her relationship with Sufi; she did not give herself to him, though Sufi tempted her in all possible ways.

However, Sufi knew from day one his purposes quite well. Ranu is an accomplished woman in many respects; she sings well and has tastes, which outclass others, but for him she is just one more woman that he must conquer. He proceeds slowly but craftily and after a chase spread over several months ar-

ranges for a party in Ranu's house when he plants to seduce her. Anyway the plot fails because in the last minute Ranu, suddenly waking up to the call of love and duty to her husband, chooses to repulse Sufi. Her marriage to Umar and also her love for her husband are too precious to be traded for so transient an affair. But before she finally throws Sufi out of the room and retraces her steps back to Umar, she submits to Sufi briefly. Mistakenly she receives a kiss from him thinking it to be Umar's, but it's few long seconds before she rectifies herself even though she immediately realised her mistake. The temptation for the other love was always there and Ranu could overcome it definitively when she had some taste of it. Throughout Ranu's affair with Sufi her fidelity to Umar never wavered and once the charm of the affair blew over she, like any other penitent wife, begged for her husband's forgiveness and was heartily forgiven. The story ends with the husband and wife the being reconciled to each other pledging undying love.

But that kind of facile ending would class the novel with similar simple tales that ooze with romanticism but rarely reflect the truth or complexity of life. This is where one notices Rashid's profundity as a writer and his clear difference from many other Bengali novelists. He tries to delve deep into the realities of life. With Sufi finally kicked out of their life, Ranu and Umar sit together in the morning to talk things over. She confesses her fascination for Sufi, and repents her mistake. Troubled by a deep sense of shame and guilt, she turns to Umar for love and support and pleads desperately: "I cannot live without you." Umar's strong love for Ranu apparently forbears him from rejecting or even doubting seri-

ously Ranu's love. The reconciliation between Ranu and Umar is sweet and pure; but I don't think that the novelist wants to leave off the story resonating a happiness forever theme. That type of naive and simplistic ending would lead to grave doubts Rashid's power as a novelist. I think he has a dark motive and in order to carry that out he has added a kind of epilogue to his story.

As the novel approaches its end, one begins to wonder what the Ranu-Umar relationship will be like in the years to come. Will they be able to bury the Sufi episode completely and return to the rosy pre-Sufi days? Hardly so; for is it not naturally that Umar's days with Ranu will be darkened by Sufi's specter? And will Ranu be able to forget Sufi entirely? Won't she also be haunted by Sufi's attempted but half-finished kiss? For the time being neither Ranu nor Umar is troubled by such anxieties but the novelist as a truthful student of human life and character knows fully well that neither of them will be able to escape these questions in the long run and from time to time will be forced to turn them over in their minds. To be precise, from now on they begin to drift into two separate worlds, though they have pledged to share one. What is worse is that they will never have the honesty and courage to acknowledge this peculiar separateness. On the contrary, they will perpetually delude each other by pretending as if nothing is amiss in their world. Ranu may be the rose of love and beauty, but she is not without a partner. Umar's anguished heart will also continue to dye the rose red. The question to note here is how the novelist has transformed this apparently romantic plot into something different from the common run of effusive romantic tales. The answer will dawn on

us when we consider the last section of the novel.

Rashid here has cleverly sued his other allusion to Shakespeare. A reader of Shakespeare's *Othello* knows quite well what role the handkerchief played in the undoing of Desdemona. She gave it to Casio out of pure compassion, but later it was used as indisputable evidence of her sexual dishonesty and precipitated her destruction in the hands of the man whose love had made her leave the security of family and home. For Desdemona the handkerchief is a banner of doom. Rashid uses the same device of a quarrel centering around a handkerchief but differently. During the scuffle between Ranu and Sufi, he inadvertently dropped his S marked handkerchief on the bed and Umar later found it. When Umar questions Ranu regarding the handkerchief with the mysterious letter, Ranu is fazed and uses her ready wit to save the situation. Playfully she teases Umar for forgetting the fact that her own other name is Sufia and begins with S. Umar may be deceived about the ownership of the handkerchief, but the reader is not. Ranu, to our surprise, has graduated into a being that does not hesitate to resort to lying to save herself. We have not seen this side of Ranu before. In fact the relationship between the husband and the wife has entered a new phase creating a space where the intruder's handkerchief will flutter forever and stand for the distance between the two. Ranu went very close to betraying her husband, but that chapter is closed. The husband the wife is reconciled and we have no reasons to doubt that in future Ranu will love Umar less or Umar will withhold from loving Ranu. On the contrary they may love each other more than before, but at the same time the two are locked in private and secret worlds of their own where the shadow of Sufi and his handkerchief, the two symbols of betrayal, will lodge ever after. The innocence of their old days is gone and their relationship has become quite complex. Rashid has wonderfully penned the complexity of Ranu-Umar relationship in *Prem Ekti Lal Golap* with the help of the two English allusions.

book review

## Utopistics

by Jim Dator

**U**TOPISTICS (Yes, that's the title. More on that below), a new book by Immanuel Wallerstein. The subtitle is "Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century." (The publisher is the New Press of New York, 1998. ISBN: 1-56584-457-2). It is only 90 pages long and composed of three chapters.

The first chapter, titled, "The failures of the dreams, or paradise lost?" is a brief, brilliant history of the capitalist world-system over the last five hundred years, to the present. The chapter title tells it all: the 500 year long capitalist world-system has triumphed over each and every secular progressive movement against it, and resulted in (among other things) the most unequalitarian society in the history of the world because, inspite of the fact that there are

large numbers of very rich who are richer than even the richest few could be previously, there are vastly more very poor, probably poorer than any were previously.

Chapter two, "The difficult transition, or hell on earth?" shows that the present world-system is in terminal crisis. It is not sustainable--neither socially nor environmentally. It is collapsing (and the fact that we are entering the A-side of a new Kondratieff wave merely makes matters worse, not better). There are increased possibilities for even more extensive war and violence over the next fifty years--the period of transition to "something else".

Chapter three, "A substantively rational world, or can paradise be regained?" is Wallerstein's attempt to state his "preferred future," as well as his analysis of all the ways his prefer-

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ences probably won't be achieved and a world worse than the present will emerge.

I offer here a few additional comments:

1. By "utopistics", Wallerstein means what most of us would call our "preferred future"--our "eutopia" in contrast with our "utopia." He only uses the

term a few times in the beginning (but it IS the title of the book) and then never mentions it again.

These words are from the second paragraph of chapter one:

"Utopistics is the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgement as to the substantive rationally of alternative possible his-

torical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human social systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future."

In other words, as I said, what futurists call a "eutopia" in contrast with a "utopia" or a "dystopia."

Why didn't he say that. Why this very clumsy new term, especially as a title?

2. There are MANY things worth my quoting for your consideration. Here is only one. Wallerstein states that the period of transition from the collapsed capitalist world-system to another world-system "...will also be a period in which the 'free will' factor will be at its maximum, meaning that individual

and collective action can have a greater impact on the future structuring of the world than such action can have in more 'normal' times, that is, during the ongoing life of an historical system." (Second paragraph, Chapter 2)

Wallerstein later returns to and stresses the extraordinary and important role which "free will" (individual and collective vision and action) can have during the period of transition, towards the end of Chapter 3.

3. Like everyone else, Wallerstein is a whole lot better at history than he is at futures visioning, and a whole lot better at saying why his preferred future won't be achieved than how it could be. It is clear he hasn't read much futures material very carefully, and his presentation is weakened because of that. But the book is very well worth reading by everyone.

## A Soul on the Roll

by Monica Das

*The Rivers and Other Poems*

By Syed Ali Ahmed

Price Taka 50, Friends Publications

**A** RMY and poetry? This may still be the stock response to the idea of army personnel waxing in poetry but there is indeed a strong if not always professed poetic tradition among the men in uniform. With his maiden published work *The Rivers and Other Poems*, Syed Ali Ahmed too at 45 has announced his identity as a member of that platoon which, country's independence and sovereignty apart is also committed to the muse of poetry.

How much of a poet Ahmed is? Well, if poetry by Wordsworth's definition, is 'turning loose of emotions' or 'spontaneous overflow of emotion' then like everyone else he too is a poet in his own right. All his poems starting from the opener 'The Midnight Sonnet to the concluding 'To The Future' record strong emotions evoked by the visible world around him--the places he had

been, the people he met. There is a certain picaresque quality about Ahmed's poems which obviously came from his extensive travelling around the world on professional assignments.

Central to his poetic consciousness and the anthology is the poem *The Rivers*. In his typically maudlin tone and not-too-conscious diction Ahmed tries to blend universality with primitivism here and one must say attains a certain degree of success in his endeavour.

His love poems stand together on the easel of every other poet--beloved's dazzling rosy cheeks, her mellifluous voice being their ingredients.

A Finger and A Button--an amalgamation of the idea of thesis and antithesis tells about the poet's world view, about his fear of war and the destruction it brings. A pacifist, Mr. Ahmed through his rhythmic anti war statement makes a sincere attempt at impressing the necessity of peace on the readers. But then is not it a typical wish of a twentieth century human being?

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Done in hard cover *The Rivers and Other Poems* has got a fairly forgettable face. Its cover jacket is a confusion of motifs with water, cloud and sandy sea shore all making a rather unhealthy inroad on readers' aesthetic sensibility.

Bereft of page number the book contains illustrations of corresponding themes on the left of all 20 poems. Though majority of the illustrations are ordinary, even poor, the one for the poem *The Peacekeepers* may make anyone venturing the book dwell on it for a while. But

there are far too many spelling errors and editing lapses to inspire a picky reader on a sail through the book.

*The Rivers and Other Poems* are essentially an exaltation of ego. Although editing and necessary polishing could have made the book more enjoyable than it actually is, it has to be observed that to be considered seriously in future the poet has to improve on craftsmanship. He has to learn the art of using both images and words refreshingly yet appropriately.

