

travelogue

Burma — No More

by Sarah E Coghlan

MY fascination with Burma dates back to childhood. Across the years I hear my father accompanying his morning ritual of shaving. I never knew the reason, but his inevitable choice was "On the Road to Mandalay — where the flying fishes play." In the dining room, the imported, paneled paper (chosen by him, I understood), featured exotic birds nesting in tropical forests. These I placed "where the dawn comes up like thunder (mistakenly, if you consult the map) out of China cross the Bay."

To satisfy my lifelong ambition, I went, last February, to Burma. But Burma is no longer Burma. It's Myanmar. And Rangoon is not Rangoon; it is now Yangon. Mandalay, however, is still Mandalay, though I doubt that "the flying fishes [still do] play." The sun does come like thunder. I saw it, as we flew into the country at early dawn. It also goes down in a glorious burst, over the Irrawaddy River, a body of water which I would not have heard of in the time of my father. But soon, we of the World War II generation came to know it well as tales of the Burma Road, of B-25s supplying Chungking, of the battle of Imphal became part of our "War in the Pacific". It was this latter little recognized conflict, Imphal, which once and for all arrested the advance of the Japanese into India — changing, undoubtedly, the subsequent history of the world.

The Burma I wanted to discover — or rediscover — has been lost for nearly three decades. The New Yorker magazine last year, in a moving article by its "Reporter at Large" introduced it as "one of Asia's most magical countries. And its most mysterious: for three decades there has been little news of life inside its sealed borders."

The International Herald Tribune, on January 5th of last year, in its "In Our Pages: 100, 75 and 50 Year Ago" column featured the 1948 celebration of the first country to leave the British Empire [save India] as "glittering with thousands of gaudy Oriental lanterns and fairy lights ... public buildings flood-lighted at night by red, green and blue lights... as the sound of the last

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Then, a few days later, in the same paper: "Burma celebrated its 50th anniversary of independence from Britain on Sunday amid opposition accusations at home and abroad that there are few freedoms in the country." So, documented by the same newspaper, is this tragedy of fifty lost years.

The current government in its promotional material pointedly employs Myanmar, "the name which has long been used by its people to describe their homeland which the British called Burma." It continues: "...Also known as the Golden Land for its rich land and the wealth of agriculture and minerals. Geographically it is the largest country in mainland South-East Asia, sharing borders with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. It is twice the size of Vietnam and approximately the size of Great Britain and France combined."

I experienced a crisis of conscience as to whether I should go to Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of a Burmese independence hero and the assassinated first president of the independent country, has been held without charge or trial since July of 1989. Her party decisively won the freely held election of 1992, but Suu Kyi has not been allowed to assume power. She has been offered permission to leave the country but, predictably, refused. Aung San has called for an embargo on foreign investment, even suggesting the imposing of sanctions by the world community. The new wave of investments is merely "putting more money in

the pockets of the elite," she states. I thought back to the South Africa of the early Nineties. I had opposed sanctions and the withdrawal of American business organizations of the principle that if you maintain no presence in a recalcitrant country, you retain no chance of influencing from within. I was evidently wrong in the case of South Africa and I may well be wrong here too. Though Suu Kyi also discourages tourism, I finally justified it in my case. I was different. I planned to tell my world (admittedly a very limited audience) about this lost country of South-East Asia and the circumstances which brought it to such a plight.

So, fortified with the prescribed malaria medication and a visa I had obtained with an ease which had surprised my friends, I crossed by air from Bangladesh, which knows little about this land which has been its neighbor for centuries.

I had some intimations as to what might be the all reaching tentacles of SLORC, the ruling junta of Generals, when I applied for a visa with the usual two passport photos and was told that five was the requisite number. Obviously they would be keeping an eye on me.

My first confirmation of being in a controlled regime came with reading what appears to be the New York Times of the country, an eight page daily, the "New Light of Myanmar." Each day, in the upper right-hand boxed column, is printed the "Four Political Objectives," the "Four Economic Objectives," and the "Four Social Objectives." Every front page story and every photo featured a

"General" So-and-So. No "Secretary of State," no "Mr. Congressman," no "Mr. Foreign Minister". If you'd like a game of tennis you can now patronize the new indoor court opened during my visit, in a ceremony attended by: the Chairman of the National Health Committee (Lt. Gen); Minister for Industry (Maj. Gen.); Chairman of Myanmar Olympic Committee for Sports (Brig.), all down the line to a lowly Lt. Colonel — undoubtedly the most involved, who reported on the construction of the sports facility.

I have always said that I had never met a Burman that I didn't like — which probably had been a total of three up to the time of this trip. Now that can be said of perhaps all hundred that I may have met. "Often charged with possessing a temperament whereby he leads a aimless life... the Burman answers that he has enough to live on and would assert that all the philosophers hold that wealth only bring new cares," wrote Shway Yoz, English Civil Servant and author of "The Burma — His Life and Notions." This publication of 1886 is still considered the classic in its field when it comes to a dissection of Burmese culture. Much of course has changed but the writings of this Colonial, beloved of the Burmans, still catches the essence of the Burmese character.

Nineteenth Century travelers were fascinated with this bit of Eastern exotica. "This is Burma, and it will be quite unlike any other land you have ever known," Rudyard Kipling writes in "Letters from the East". Mark Twain, an expert in perhaps both, called it the "land of pretty girls and bad charoots." In the

Twentieth Century a seemingly unlikely commentator, American President Herbert Hoover, called the Burmese the "only really happy people in all of Asia."

Yangon, with its fading but still lovely colonial architecture, displays much of the delight we had heard of Burma. You sense a certain divide; you are now looking towards the East of the Indo-Chinese countries and the Chinese behemoth beyond. Traffic being almost nonexistent, there is plenty of opportunity to appreciate the tree-lined avenues. A friend of mine long gone from her country, recalled how, as children, they measured their way to school by counting the trees.

One of the leafiest of these boulevards is University Avenue. It appears innocent enough, but the guide assured me that the moment you enter — on foot or by car — the military appears from round every corner. You are approaching the tree screened, somewhat delapidated bungalow where Aung San Suu Kyi has lived, first in enforced, now in now self chosen restricted residence, for nine years.

I am an unabashed anglophile. Whenever I alight at a former British colony, I head for the old Raj Hotel. In Calcutta it is the Grand, once the epitome of Colonial elegance, now absorbed (expensively) into the Omni chain. The legendary Raffles of Singapore is surrounded on three sides by an impenetrable maze of Paris and Fifth Avenue shops. Suva still calls its Raj "The Grand," but it has definitely seen grander times — those days, for in-

stance, when the High Court of tropical Fiji debated under 18th Century wigs curling down below their sweating shoulders.

In Rangoon it was, and in Yangon it still is, The Strand. The old landmark has been recently renovated, as the brochure says, "to reflect the epoch of the 1920s and 1930s." Somerset Maugham might have ordered the Rangoon equivalent of the Singapore Sling in one of its spacious, high ceilinged lounges — the twirly fans now replaced by icy or AC.

"The Road to Mandalay" these days is a \$4,000, six-day trip up the Irrawaddy in a grandiose cruise ship — not exactly the paddle boat of a romantic Asiatic yore. My ascent was by unimaginative plane and auto, but the highlight, whatever the means of transport, has to be the long deserted city of Bagan. Located 190km south of Mandalay, these are the relics of the first period of Myanmar's greatness from the 11th to the 13th Century. Now under slow restoration, with its 2000 temples and monuments, Bagan is the richest archaeological site in Asia. A friend had forewarned me — prepare yourself for what will be a future attraction of the magnitude of Cambodia's Angkor Watt.

The "Land of Pagodas" overwhelms. I, always pragmatic, tried to calculate the cost of regilding thousands of temples which, I was told, must be done every two years. Could this "gold" be better spent on children who do not have enough to eat? or towards mothers who do not survive childbirth? But nowhere does there appear to be seriously malnourished children. The mothers appear reasonably healthy; the literacy rate is exceedingly high for a third world country, usually an indication of better days to come. Man, we know, cannot live on bread alone. If such nourishes the Buddhist soul, so be it.

Should those who propose the tenants of democracy, who deplore factions which physically prevent a duly elected majority party from taking office, make the trip to Burma, thereby — as Sun Yui contends — giving financial input to this deplorable government? My only advice: Let your conscience be your guide.

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poetry

Our Poets of the New Generation

by A Z M Haider

It is inordinately difficult to dwell on our poets of the new generation or, to be precise, on our poets of the eighties and nineties without relating them with our vast and varied poetic tradition. Even if we do not delve deeper into the distant past, it is not possible to evade reference to poets of the forties to place them in the perspective of our poetic tradition.

In the thirties except Nazrul Islam, Bengali Muslims did not produce any significant poet. Despite his iconoclastic spirit and lyrical agony of his exquisitely melodious songs, Nazrul was dwarfed into insignificance in the glare of Rabindranath Tagore's poetic genius. Therefore we can safely skip over the decade of thirties.

In the forties Bengali Muslims produced significant poets like Farruk Ahmed, Syed Ali Ahsan, Ahsan Habib, Abul Hossain, Talim Hossain etc. Farruk Ahmed was indisputably the most outstanding poet of the decade of forties. He carved out a niche for himself by initiating Islamic tradition which later came to be recognized as an absolutely new trend in the history of Bengali poetry. Poets before and after him wrote numerous poems on the legendary lore of Islam. But none could set Islamic trend in Bengali poetry as Farruk Ahmed could do. Judged by any literary standard, Farruk Ahmed's poetry is of high literary excellence. Although he projected the glory and greatness of Islam through his poetry, he by no means allowed his ideas to weigh on the literary qualities of his poetry.

The decade of fifties is very significant because it has marked a complete departure from the past tradition and set a new trend hitherto unknown in the history of poetry of this country. This decade produced highly talented, elitist and urban-oriented poets like Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Shahid Kadri, Alauddin-Al-Azad. Al-Mahmud is also a poet of this generation. But by reasons of his rural background he lacked sophistication of Shamsur Rahman and Fazal Shahabuddin.

Following footprints of the poets of thirties — Jibanananda Das, Buddhadev Basu, Vishnu Dey, Shudhhranav

Datta etc. — the poets of the fifties of this country introduced elements of modernity as conceived in the west in Bengali poetry of this country. It is through the masterly rendering of the French poet Baudelaire's poetry in Bengali by Buddhadev Basu that Bangladeshi poets of fifties have been ushered into the realm of modern European poetry. They are also profoundly influenced by works of German poet Rilke, and English poets W B Yeats and T S Eliot, without compromising their own originality and individual characteristics.

As has been stated, Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Shahid Kadri and Al-Mahmud are outstanding poets who have left indelible imprint on poets of the succeeding generations. Alauddin-Al-Azad and Syed Shamsul Haq are essentially novelists and short story writers. But their contribution to poetry is quite considerable. Particularly, Alauddin-Al-Azad, who is in his early seventies, continues to have date with poetry even now. His poems on the language movement and his compatriots' struggle for cultural autonomy left an abiding impact on younger poets.

Nirmalendu Goon, Rafiq Azad, Abdul Mannan Syed, Sikandar Aminul Haq, Mahadev Saha — major poets of the sixties — failed to extricate themselves from the overwhelming influence of their predecessors of the fifties. They kept writing under the magic spell of the stalwarts of fifties without trying to break away with the tradition of their able predecessors. They concentrated on socialism, patriotism and liberation war in their poetical works written in the style and tradition of the poets of fifties. One of them, Abdul Mannan Syed, to be specific, tried in vain to break away with the tradition of the fifties and establish himself as a surrealist poet. Having failed to make headway in his effort, he has of late started singing in praise of the glory and greatness of Islam. What a mental metamorphosis!

Socialism as a political ideology is fast dwindling down to insignificance. After the collapse of Soviet Union it has at best turned into a subject of academic

interest. The concept of surrealism in poetry, painting and other forms of art has failed to find acceptability. It was in this backdrop of changing scenario that poets of the seventies in this country emerged in the field of poetry. Abid Azad, Shihab Sarkar, Rudra Mohammed Shahidullah are notable poets of this decade. Rudra Mohammed Shahidullah was quite a powerful poet. He was deeply engrossed in anti-autocracy movement that swept this country from mid-seventies. His outcry against the military dictatorship that ruled this country during the period seemed as it were he was getting bogged down to politics and his works started degenerating into political slogans. But he disentangled himself before long from his mental obsession against despotism and dictatorship and started concentrating on man's inner urge to build this world into a blessed home of love, fraternity, friendship, fellow-feeling. His poetical works entitled *Manusher Manchitra* (man's map) portrays his deep and abiding love for man and this beautiful earth.

Rudra Mohammed Shahidullah, Abid Azad, Shihab Sarkar kept writing in the same vein as those of his predecessors. But Abid Azad, representing a striking departure from the past tradition, tried to establish himself as a post-modernist poet and identify himself with that school of poets of the eighties and nineties who tried without any success to revolt against the modernist tradition set so assiduously by Shamsur Rahman, Fazal Shahabuddin, Shahid Kadri etc and continued by their successors.

Poets of the New Generation

This, in short, provides the setting for the younger poets of the eighties and nineties. The eighties unfortunately is the decade of dichotomy and division among poets of this country. It was during this decade that poets fell apart into two distinctly divergent streams, one representing Kavita Kendra and the other Kavita Parishad. Led by Fazal Shahabuddin, Syed Ali Ahsan and Alauddin-Al-Azad etc, Kavita Kendra

staged Asian poetry festival in '87 and '89. Fazal has his own constellation of poets revolving round his poetry journal called "Kavi-Kantha" (voice of poets). Kavi Kantha is a poetry journal of very high standard and Annada Shankar Ray, a literary figure of international eminence, paid rich tribute to Kavi-Kantha for its high literary standard.

Shamsur Rahman, who was co-editor of Kavi-Kantha, remained associated with Kavita-Kendra at the initial stage. But soon after he left Kavita Kendra to start Kavita-Parishad the activities of which all along remained confined to holding annual poetry festival at TSC Square on the university campus. Earlier, he along with his constellation of poets organized Padabali, a platform for poetry which however did not click. One of the striking aspects of Kavita Parishad or Poetry Council was that it dragged poetry to streets and transformed it into a vehicle of purveying cheap political slogans to people.

Taking advantage of the conflict which caused split among poets, some elderly bureaucrats infiltrated into the domain of poetry and tried in vain to establish themselves as poets through Kavita Kendra.

It was due to conflict which created rift between stalwarts that the younger poets who surfaced in the eighties and nineties suffered most. Having lost sense of direction in the cross-fire they stood bewildered and baffled. They had no example to emulate, no ideal to pursue. Most of them took sides. A few of them remained aloof and isolated.

Paradoxically enough, feuds and disputes notwithstanding, the decade of eighties gave rise to a climate conducive to large yield of poets. It was during this decade that poets like Rezauddin Stalin, Aminur Rahman, Gazi Rafiq, Taslima Nasreen, Nasima Sultana, Khondokar Ashraf Hossain, Mufazzal Karim, Sajjad Sharif, Farid Kabir, Mohan Rayhan etc emerged. Most of these poets have immense potentialities.

Besides, it was during this decade poetry assumed a festive look with poets reciting poetry at parks, street corners, traffic islands as well as in auditoriums

before multitudes listening to them. This gave a tremendous impetus to poetry movement in this country.

The review of the poets of eighties will remain incomplete without reference to works of the major poets of this decade. To begin with, Rezauddin Stalin is still writing poetry on love and romance. He has a good sense of rhythm which makes his poems extremely readable. One of Stalin's virtues as a poet is that he makes strenuous effort to improve his verses by chiselling them.

Aminur Rahman is another important poet of this decade. The poet is now in his early thirties. When he started writing poetry, he was in his early twenties. His first work *Hridaypure Dubshatar* which came out in 1993 is an anthology of sonnets and short poems expressing love-laden soul, romantic feelings and deep pessimism. He experimented with sarabritta, marabritta, Akkharbritta to make them consistent with his deep pessimism and excruciating pang of love. Some of his love poems are so rhythmic that they make readers hearts dance with their measure.

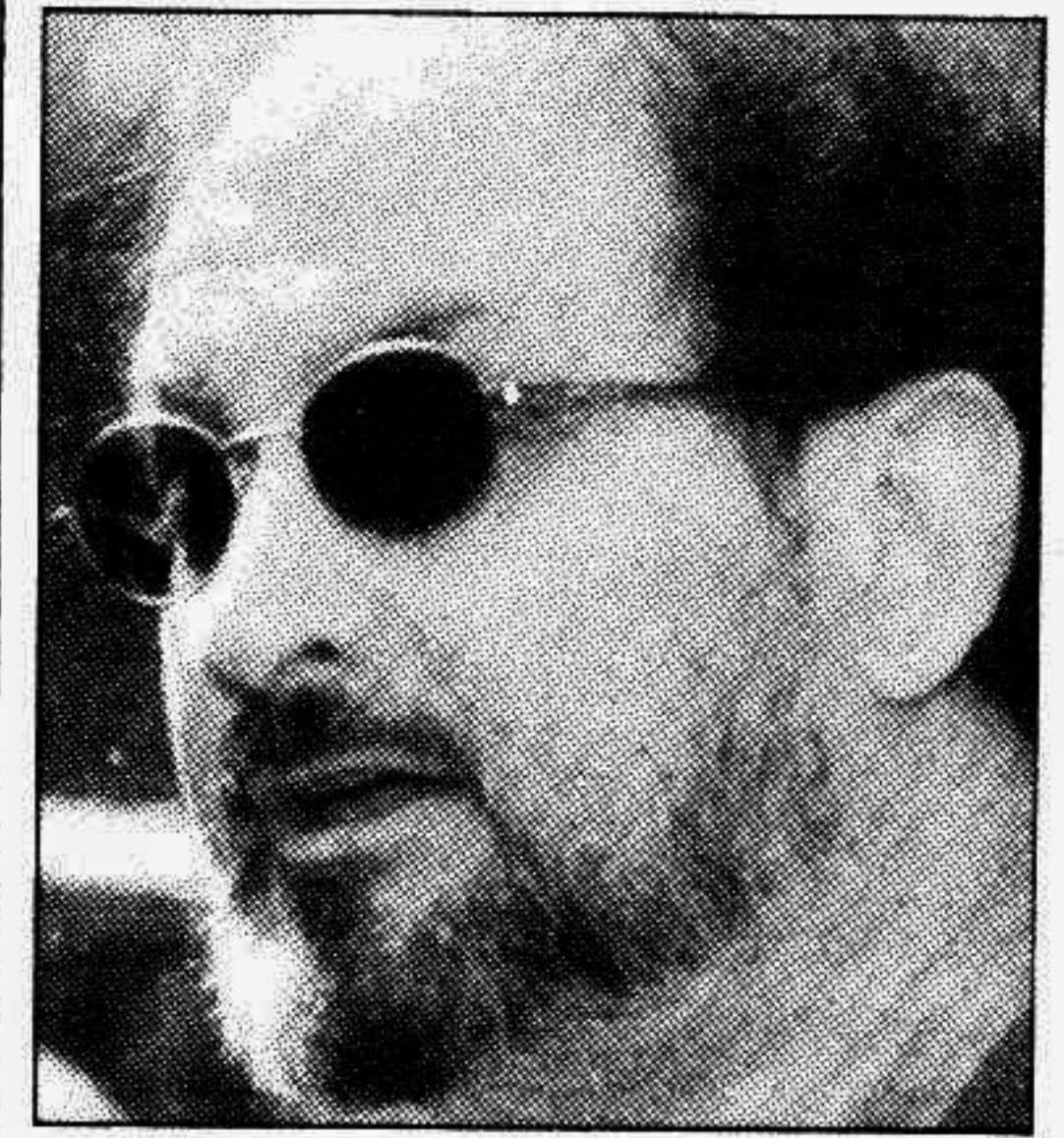
Gazi Rafiq and Taslima Nasreen's love poems touch the cord of emotion. Nasima Sultana dwells mostly on love and eroticism. Taslima Nasreen would have gone very high as a poet if she had not digressed to novels and short stories. Khondokar Ashraf Hossain's poems on liberation war will stand the test of time.

In the decade of nineties a number of promising young men have made their debut in the field of poetry. Conspicuous among them are Shakeel Reaz, Chanchal Ashraf, and Raju Alim.

Most of this breed of poets suffers from the crisis of identity. They do not want to associate themselves with the trend being continued by their predecessors for decades. They prefer to delink themselves from the mainstream in an attempt to present themselves as post modernist poets.

It is too early to comment on their claim to post modernism. Let them first of all establish their credentials as poets before laying their claim to post modernism.

literary news



Rushdie Puts Words to U2's Music

AUTHOR Salman Rushdie has contributed lyrics to a new song by the Irish rock band U2, the Guardian newspaper reported Jan 22.

Rushdie, who has lived in hiding for nearly a decade since being condemned to death by Iran's leader for his 1989 book "The Satanic Verses," gave U2 lead singer Bono the lyrics taken from his new novel, "The Ground Beneath Her Feet," the newspaper said.

The romantic ballad, also to be called "The Ground Beneath Her Feet," will be on U2's next album, the report said. "Bono and I have been friends for several years, and I sent him the novel when I'd finished it, and he responded by coming up with this beautiful melody," the newspaper quoted Rushdie as saying. "Simple as that, but of course very pleasurable."

Rushdie's literary agency declined to comment on the Guardian's report.

The newspaper said U2 hopes to release the single to coincide with the Apr. 13 release of Rushdie's novel. The book tells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice against a rock-and-roll background, it said.

The author's collaboration with U2 would not be his first: He appeared onstage with the band in London in 1993. Rushdie was condemned to death in 1989 after the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founding spiritual leader of the Islamic republic, ruled "The Satanic Verses" was blasphemous to Islam.