

book review

The Allure of the Everyday

by Alice Truax

Freedom Song

Three Novels
By Amit Chaudhury
434 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.

"Three novels by a young writer less interested in one particular story than in all the bits and pieces of ordinary life."

MIDWAY through the first of the three slim novels in this collection, an Indian boy named Sandeep sets out with his uncle for an evening walk through the back lanes of Calcutta during a power failure. Sandeep is only 10, but he already thinks of himself as a writer, and he finds his curiosity stirred by each house he passes: the one with a dozing watchman, "which gave the impression that the family had valuables locked away inside"; the one with the old man on its veranda; "or this small, shabby house with the girl Sandeep glimpsed through a window, sitting in a bare, ill-furnished room, memorizing a text by candlelight, repeating suffixes and prefixes from a Bengali grammar over and over to herself -- why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them?"

Amit Chaudhury is an immensely gifted writer who is less interested in one particular story than in all the bits and pieces of stories that make up ordinary life: "The 'real' story, with its beginning, middle, and conclusion," will never be told, he warns us cheerfully, because it does not exist. This conviction may be both his blessing and his curse. His novels -- or novellas, really are crammed with breathtaking sentences, sharp characterizations, comic set pieces and melancholy grace notes; they are also stubbornly, teasingly plotless. At times, they seem artless as well as if the author were simply dipping his net at random into the stream of daily life in Calcutta or Oxford or Bombay and then holding up his glittering catch for inspection.

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So, as promised, these novels don't progress, exactly, but instead explore some exalted or uneasy temporary state, which occasionally throws off intimations of its opposite. In the first, "A Strange and Sublime Address" (1991), Sandeep, an only child, is intoxicated by the boisterous intimacy of his uncle's household in Calcutta, which stands in contrast to his more privileged and

lonely existence in Bombay. At 17 Vivekananda Road, there is always something afoot -- a visit from a wheeling relative, a Sunday drive in the unreliable Ambassador, a trip to the market and everything is a matter of intense, almost undifferentiated interest.

Chaudhury is perpetually delighted with "the enduring allure of the everyday," and Sandeep provides the ideal conduit for his creator's lush imaginings. In the afternoons, the maid servant wrings the newly washed saris "into long, exhausted pythons of cloth," and the ancient ceiling fan moves "unreliably from side to side, like a great bird trying to fly." Even Calcutta's chronic power outages are transformed, improbably, into a daily miracle:

"Each day there would be a power cut, and each day there would be the unexpected, irrational thrill when the lights returned With what appeared to be an instinct for timing, the rows of fluorescent lamps glittered to life simultaneously. The effect was the opposite of blowing out candles on a birthday cake:

it was as if someone had blown on a set of unlit candles, and the magic exhalation had brought a flame to every wick at once."

In "Afternoon Raag" (1993), a more ambitious and more melancholy work, a wistful Indian graduate student at Oxford alternates between describing his unhappy simultaneous involvement with two fellow students and his memories of growing up in India, where he and his mother took music lessons from a beloved teacher, once famous for singing raags, who has since died. In one suggestive passage, Chaudhury writes:

"The straight, angular notes of Western music, composed and then rendered, are like print upon a page; in contrast, the curving meanders of the raag are like longhand writing drawn upon the air. Each singer has his own impermanent longhand with its own arching, idiosyncratic beauties, its own repetitive, serpentine letters. With the end of the recital, this longhand, which, in its unraveling, is a matter of constant er-

sures and rewritings, is erased completely, unlike the notes of Western music, which remain printed upon the page."

In this fictional reworking, the opposite holds true: the Indian sections of the narrative, which function almost as an accompaniment to the Oxford "raag," remain vivid and sure, while the transplanted Indians, crisscrossing various meticulously described vectors of the Oxford landscape, become increasingly blurred and inexact. Familiar walls and furniture supply the comfort ordinarily found in other people, an anticipated rendezvous is canceled by a sudden rainstorm. Indeed, only the narrator's cheerful upstairs neighbor, Sharma, acquires any permanence: it's as if the others have been washed away by the English weather. We ache for them in an abstract way, but we don't know them well enough to miss them properly. At one point the narrator, hiding in a wardrobe from his girlfriend as a joke, finds that he doesn't

have "the courage to emerge," and this poignant moment seems at once the heart of the story and also the explanation for its failures. The last novel, "Freedom Song" (1995), concerns two related households in Calcutta in 1993, going about their domestic business against a distant backdrop of civil unrest. Despite its title, the story is no more about politics than "Afternoon Raag" is about romantic love. Khuku, the mother in one household, is chiefly irritated with the Muslims because their call to worship wakes her up so early every morning; her husband, a retired businessman, has been hired to cure a "sick" candy factory that doesn't particularly want to be cured. Across town, Khuku's brother worries about his son's affiliations with the Communist Party, but only because they may affect his ever-so-gradually coalescing marriage prospects. As in the earlier novels, Chaudhury's characterizations have all the affectionate indulgence of a family portrait, but here there is no acknowledgment of his place in it, and this absence throws his essentially comic depiction of middle-class Indian life open for sharper inspection: his persistent and deliberate avoidance of his darker strains seems evasive, even a little precious. And yet at the same time, his ever-burgeoning family of characters has come to seem extremely familiar. Unmoored from their author, unhindered by grand themes or intricate plot lines, they have made themselves at home in our imaginations, like newly discovered relatives.

impressions

A Whiff of Gardenia and My Memory of Old Bengal

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

"The more sand has escaped from the hourglass of our life, the clearer we should see through it." — Albert Camus. A whiff of *Gandha-Raj* (Gardenia) is all that was necessary to push me back to the halcyon days of my youth!

Last night I was up until the wee hours of night racing to finish my essay on Eqbal Ahmad. Dr. Eqbal Ahmed died in the second week of May 1999. His death reminded me the ephemeral nature of our lives. We are here today, gone tomorrow. But then, Eqbal Ahmed in this short period of time tried his best to imprint his footstep on the sands of time. He simply wrote beautiful, serene essays in this maddening world gone half-crazy. To place a tribute for this great soul, I thought it would be appropriate to write a few kind words from the perspective of a Bengali. After all, Eqbal Ahmad did extend his helping hand for the cause of Bangladesh in 1971. Once my essay was done, I felt a sigh of relief knowing that I did my job. The story needs to be told, if not in great details but succinctly.

Since I was very tired for being awake until 2:00 clock last night, I was lying down half-asleep in bed past 9:00 AM in Saturday. My bed room window was wide open and door was ajar. A refreshingly crisp spring breeze was flowing through my bedroom. The workload of my vocation and avocation for the past week wreaked havoc on my mental health. Thus, I was looking forward to this weekend to 'recharge' my mental battery. Everyone at home knew I needed extra hours of sleep to keep my sanity. But Mother Nature was not in a mood to cooperate with me. I might add she was rather cross with me. My languorous state of mind got a wakeup call from Mother Nature when I smelled a fresh whiff of gardenia, which were

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You see — it was not an accident that I smelled the intoxicating essence of gardenias. It was all planned that way to satisfy my delicate sensibility and to conjure up an image of Golden Bengal, which I left unwittingly some thirty years ago.

I was fortunate to grow up in the suburbs of Dhaka in the 50's. My father being a government official was given a

choice to live in Azimpure or Motijheel government quarters, but he had enough sensibility in him to opt for a serene and easygoing pastoral life in semi-rural Tejgaon over the much desired glitz city life.

The easy pace of life in semi-rural Tejgaon helped me to appreciate Mother Nature's bounty. Our house was an oasis amidst a few acres of greenery. We had all sorts of creepers, vines, and small bushes in the perimeter of our compound. I can close my eyes now and still smell the strong aroma of *Kathali-Chapa* flower, which smelled sort of like ripened *Kathal* (JackFruit). For, it left a permanent imprint of its strange hypnotic odor in my mind. We also had gardenia (*Gandha-Raj*) bushes scattered here and there. In the monsoon days of my youth, which I always thought to be stretched out to cover 5-6 month's period, I was enamored with the awesome

beauty of gardenia flowers. The large almost white *Gandha-Raj* flowers look wondrous amidst its lithe branches. The entire bush would be smothered with dark lush green foliage. The sweet odors of *Gandha-Raj* were as hypnotic as it looked in a monsoon-drenched day. The more the precipitation, the bigger the white or creamy white flower. For the life of me, I can't imagine the splendor of rustic Bengal without a whiff of majestic *Gandha-Raj*.

Anachronously, as I lay half-asleep in the spring day in Deep South of America — half a world away from my Xanadu — the mere smell of gardenia in the air hurtled me back into the days of my cradle.

Oh, Golden Bengal — the plebeian land of Rabindranath, Nazrul, Michael Madhusudan, Jibanananda, Bishnu Dey and many more — how I longed for thee! The sweltering summer heats of

Deep South may easily fool a hopeless romantic like me with its alluring allusions. And it did. Summer is almost there; I can hear her footsteps. The semi-tropical breeze from Gulf of Mexico, which is laden with moisture, is on the way. Afternoon thunderstorms will be a constant companion in the Mississippi delta. More rain means more showy gardenia — just like Golden Bengal. The creamy-white flowers of gardenia, which I adore most, will most certainly adorn my flower vases in the bedroom, in the leaving room, and in the breakfast area. Sipping at my Darjeeling tea sitting in the confine of my airy kitchen I can see the many splendors of gardenia bush now — a dozen of them showing arrogantly the large inflorescence. The smell of gardenia is everywhere. I can't get away from it no matter how hard I try.

It is almost 10 o'clock in the morn-

ing. I still cannot get up from my bed. The cavalcade of fresh aroma from my gardenia bush had all but numbed my senses. I am but a hapless prisoner to Mother Nature now.

Consciously, I tried my best to recreate the verdure of Old Bengal in this alien land. Mother Nature very willingly permitted me to have these lush bushes of gardenia. However, there is a price tag for my success.

All I have to do now is take a whiff of gardenia. This will surely push me back to the halcyon days of my youth. I was penniless then. Nevertheless, I was carefree and happy. I was free like a *Ganga-Foring* (dragonfly). I was not tethered to anything.

The complex lifestyle in the West has taken its toll on our lives. The tentacles of life, auto, health, and property insurance, stocks and bonds, CDs, 401K plan and hustle and bustle of Wall Street have all but stifled our free spirit.

I have a confession to make. I was not prepared to face the brave new world this morning. The aroma of *Gandha-Raj* still lingers where I lay half-asleep. The strong northerly breeze brings more fragrance from the gardenia bushes. Give me more of those. I can take it. I wished the glory of Old Bengal would stay a little longer with me today.

About the writer: Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah, writes from New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

reflections

Thoughts from the other side of 50

by Syed Maqsud Jamil

It is not long ago, the famous Rock Singer Mick Jagger of The Rolling Stones celebrated his 50th birthday. If I remember correctly, he was born after the second great war. I hold his singing talents in regard. But the particular reasons I take interest in him have no link with his singing talents. He as I have found out, is very keen about cricket and is a friend of Imran. That makes him important to me.

I further learned, Mick Jagger is an August born. It interests me because I am an August born too! Yet another thin in common is that I have also become 50; last year. It is understandable, Mick Jagger has worldwide popularity. And a great many of them are women. But that has not compromised his standing in the Rock world.

Bill Clinton is rather unfortunate in this regard, in spite of the fact that he has lot of things in common with Mick.

Interestingly though, the reaching of 50 receives greater attention among men. In fact, it is the number that fascinates. Half a century! Even more because, very few people reach the 100 year mark. Besides, the physical dependence in it is not a delightful prospect. The dependence and degeneration of old age can make life and body a punishment. In comparison to the milestone of 100 years, the 50 year mark is therefore a far more healthy and active way of getting old.

Clinton was born in 1946, a year after the great war. He turned 50 in 1996. The year he got re-elected. He is also another August born. The date being the 19th. A good saxophone player — he was playing it well, till that lady, Ms Lewinsky came into his life. On the other side of 50, he is perhaps looking through the ironbars of prison cell window!

Even Mick Jagger is not much heard these days. From my side of 50, what I believe from these examples. That life becomes vulnerable after 50. Yet at least for celebrities like Clinton and Anwar. For fame has many enemies. Thomas Hardy became famous at thirty-eight with his masterpiece — *The Return of the Native*. But the daring openness of his portrayal of human faults and frailties, that too in a Victorian society, was to bring on him savage abuse and cutting criticism. The criticism was so violent that he devoted the rest 30 years of his life to poetry.

In fact, age, in its exclusive power, is neither a guardian nor a formulator of our fate. That is what I see from the other side of 50. Our fascination with the 50 year has nothing to do with the fixity of a time of our life — a turning point from where changes occur. Changes, indeed do occur, with age, the most fundamental change, being that of the body. It is however a gradual process which begins well before we become 50. With the women, the changes can be bracketed within a period. The onset of menopause syndrome and the cessation of menstrual cycle.

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Sophocles, the Greek dramatist brings the matter into sharper focus. He observes "---- if men are sensible and good tempered, old age is as easy enough to bear, if not youth as well as age is a burden". At 50, the rational is much stronger for submission to the underlying reality. That, we no longer have the ready and renewable vitality of the youth. By vitality of youth, we understand energy, passion and fury. It is the limited nature of these that tell us, we are 50 and getting old.

Yes! of course, Tony Locke played cricket up to the age of 50. But for that matter in his test cricketing days, the game of cricket was not a vigorous exercise for a slow left-arm spinner.

To be continued