

reflection

A Thousand Lotuses

by Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

HERE once was a place in South Asia that was known as Bengal. To distinguish this land from modern-day Bangladesh and West Bengal, I am taking the liberty of calling it the Old Bengal. This Old Bengal was before my time and as such I won't describe the beauty and grandeur of this resplendent land from my memory even if I try a thousand times. However, I heard firsthand from my elders in my childhood the awesome beauty of this legendary awe-inspiring land. The storytellers who lived and toil the earth beneath their feet have all exited this ephemeral world, one by one. And, now the onus is on my generation to recount those narratives. The narratives of copious verdure and of legend, shrouded with mystery. The thing that baffles me the most is what did happen to all these legends and verdancy. Where have they gone? Inscrutably, I ponder! Is there any way to bring them back?

This magical land of Old Bengal did exist in the turn of this century. My grandfathers' time, I presume, was the fleeting moment of history. The day of opulence and verdancy was already on the wane. My father was just an infant then. My mother was not born yet. The Old Bengal was a sea of a thousand lotuses.

I have a hopeless ardor for seeing the foliage floating on surface water. That is the rationale for my liking lotuses, the *Padmas*, and water lilies, the *Shaplas*. In My Shangri-La, there is always a room for lotus garden. Why not? Oh, what a heavenly sight to see those big circular leaves amidst still water of a pond with occasional large blooms of creamy white or faint red lotus flowers. These awe-inspiring sights may have touched the hearts of ancient people of our part of the world.

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The prince of Kapilavastu Siddhartha Gautama must have lived amidst floating lotus garden and he must have liked the lotus blossom a lot. Is it surprising that too many Buddhist paintings have images of *Siddhartha* sitting next to majestic flower? *Sakya Muni Amitabha* was invariably at peace with Mother Nature especially amidst blossoming-lotus plants. The picture-perfect lotus pond with its placidity must have had created an idyllic backdrop for Buddha's yearlong meditation. Besides, Buddha's serene and meditative demeanor blends well with the décor of a lotus garden. Without lotuses how can you have the ultimate bliss ∞ the nirvana?

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Mind you that the ancient Bengal used to be the land very much influenced by the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama. His birthplace is located north of Varanasi in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, which is at the foothill of Himalayas. Northern edge of Vanga (Bongo) is not too far from Gautama's birthplace. Thus, it was natural that Buddhism would flourish in our ancient land. Historians now say that about one thousand years ago, during the reign of *Palas* entire Bongo was imbued with the teaching of *Sakyamuni*. The most ancient relic of Bangladesh, the ruins at Paharpur, was a dormitory of Buddhist *Vikhus*. I can't even imagine a

Buddhist *Mot* (school) without a lotus garden which we Bengalis call a *Padma-pukur*. Mind that the terrain over Northwest Bengal was very different a thousand years ago than now. Who knows? There could have been a number of *Dighi* or *Jheel* with lotuses all over the place.

As Buddhism spread to China, the *Vikhus* may have taken lotus seeds with them to the alien land. A few years ago, I visited some Ming tombs near Beijing. I learned that lotus plants were so much revered in China that the ancient king would ask in advance for some lotus seeds to be placed in his would be burial place. Botanists say that lotus seed may remain dormant for hundreds of years without losing the ability to produce offspring. The ancient kings thought quite appropriately that they may be wakened after a long slumber and taken to a new place. They wanted to have those lotus seeds within their reaches so that they can propagate the serene plants that would bear the heavenly blossoms right in time for the ambiance very much needed for *moksha-lav* or nirvana. Well, such was the reverence for a heavenly water-loving plant.

Lotus is very definitely native to our land. The scientific name of lotus is *Nelumbium nucifera*. The genus name *Nelumbium* must have originated from

a Sanskrit word *Nelumbu* or *Nel Ombu* (Blue Water). The plant is a majestic one any fashion you look at it. The leaves are circular with a large diameter; the showy solitary flower usually projects above the water. There is a mild fragrance associated with the aroma of the flower. The Greek mythology also mentions lotus copiously in the ancient literature. However, that lotus is a different water plant from the one we have in South Asia and China. According to Greek legend anyone eating a lotus fruit would go into a state of "dreamy and contented forgetfulness." Is it possible that those fruits will have psychotropic chemicals in them?

The Western literature has coined a word "Lotus-eater" in classical mythology. The Greek hero Odysseus found a member of people in a state of languorous forgetfulness induced by eating the legendary lotus fruit. Even in modern time the indolent daydreamers are euphemistically called the lotus-eater. I am not going to argue here whether lotus fruit has the ability to put people in a different realm, but it is almost certain that lotus plants with blossom on it can induce celestial blessings. Otherwise, Lord Siddhartha Gautama would not have gone for it. We all know how austere his lifestyle was. To stay in harmony with Mother Nature is the

very essence of Buddhist philosophy. Is it a wonder that Buddhist *Vikhus* not only spread the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama but also spread the awesome beauty of this celestial plant?

I was very lucky to have lived close to a *Padma Dighi* in the 50s in a suburb of Dhaka. Adjacent to the Tejgaon Mosque there was large pond by the name *Lal Dighi*. It was truly a *Padma Dighi*. In the middle of the pond, there were quite a few lotuses with occasional flower on them. As a child, we used to swim to the center of the pond just to have a glimpse of creamy white lotus flower. Our elders used to say, "Don't ever go close to those flowers now." They feared that water snakes would be attracted by the mild fragrance of the flower. We took our chances, anyway.

In my last visit to Dhaka, I could not find the trace of that fabulous *Padma Dighi* anymore. I felt nauseated and my vision became blurry for a moment. The government filled the *Dighi* with dirt brought from outside. In defiance, a metallic road is obviously showing its dark metallic tar on which buses, taxis, and all sorts of vehicles are making cacophony. The only *Padma Dighi* of Tejgaon was gone to oblivion. No one ever cares any more about the splendors of Mother Nature in Dhaka. Convenience takes precedence over

scenic beauties. A road that would save people time to go from one place to another is far more desirable than a *Padma Dighi*.

I feel relieved that Siddhartha Gautama won't be visiting our newly formed nation ever. Thanks heaven for that! For, he had attained Nirvana a long time ago. He must have seen a thousand lotuses in his days. My grandfather must have seen quite a few lotus gardens in Old-Bengal in the turn of the century. My parents growing up in the 20s and 30s may also have seen only a handful of *Padma Dighis*. I grew up in the 50s and 60s in the suburb of Dhaka. Lucky that I have seen one lotus garden almost everyday of my youth. I took solace in it. But, how about the thousands and thousands of children who are growing up in Dhaka these days? Will they ever see a lotus plant with flower on it once in their life?

Lucky for us that lotus seed can survive hundreds of years. Will it be possible then to replant them in our ponds and waterways? Bangladesh has plenty of low lying areas suitable for lotus. Furthermore, there are thousands of ponds in our villages ready to be transformed into *Padma-pukur*. A wise person had said, "A thing of beauty is joy for ever." For our eyes only, we can have a thousand lotuses. Only then, might we change the national flower of Bangladesh from *Shapla* (water lily) to *Padma* (lotus). The word lotus evokes a profound emotion in my mind. I can say that with certitude. At least for old glory's sake can we think about a thousand lotuses?

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book review

Shena Mackay's Novel Dissects The Solipsistic Commonplaces That Inform Our Social Rituals

by Paul Baumann

THIS is a vicious little book, and thus all the more enjoyable. No one who shed a tear over the cruelly publicized life, loves and death of Diana, Princess of Wales, should open it. No florist without a keen sense of irony -- *The Artist's Widow* may speak the last word on the wilted sentimentality of floral tributes -- will be able to stomach its petal-strewn plot. The Scottish-born writer Shena Mackay is known as a dyspeptic moral judge, a merciless inquisitor into the trivia and trinkets of our everyday world. (Her collection of stories is titled "Dreams of Dead Women's Handbags.") When she casts her gimlet eye on the characters in her latest novel, she aims both to amuse and to unnerve. And she largely succeeds. Set in contemporary London, *"The Artist's Widow"* is framed by two deaths. "John had the perfect excuse for being late tonight," the title character muses on the opening page, surveying a gallery full of vaguely familiar faces, "for he was unavoidably and indefinitely detained at Golders Green." The recently deceased John is, of course, the lucky one. Mackay places us, confusingly at times, alongside John's estimable widow, Lyris, as she endures the retrospective exhibition of

Mackay places us, confusingly at times, alongside John's estimable widow, Lyris, as she endures the retrospective exhibition of her husband's paintings. Deftly sketching in the buzz and blur of the crowded room, Mackay brings Lyris's grief sharply into the foreground. Other characters, however, are shoved on stage and whisked off before their names, let alone their relationships to one another, can be grasped. This dizzying pace is kept up through much of the novel as myriad subplots intersect with the small drama of Lyris's widowhood. Although the jigsaw-puzzle shape of these interlocking snapshots nicely mimics the truncated personalities of the characters, the reader's expectations for coherence are shortchanged.

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"Nathan backed away to look for

somebody to impress. Louis watched him dump his empty glasses on a passing tray, snatch a bottle of red wine and push his way into a circle of writers and painters who didn't pause in their conversation. Nathan took a slug from the bottle, and picked at a clot on the front of his shirt. It was not, as Lyris supposed, paint. He was furious that he had not been invited and scowled round the room, thinking he recognized various people from the funeral, some with babies strapped to their chests.

Nathan's interest in babies was limited to dismembered plastic dolls. No doubt they'd all be trouting at the ivy later while he was plonking home on the

Northern Line. The old bat had really dissed him this time. Nathan belched and, catching sight of a gorgeous bird wasting herself on some wizened scrot, began to move on her." -- from the first chapter of *The Artist's Widow*. Lyris is first accosted by her regrettable great-nephew, Nathan Pursey, an indolent but ambitious knave masquerading as a conceptual artist. His customary smell of cannabis, mildew and Marlboro had acquired top notes of hummus and stale white wine." Nathan wears his ignorance and lack of scruples boisterously. "Jacob, my man!" he exclaims, spotting a source of ready information. "I need to pick your brains for an installation I'm doing. You know

that Kristallnacht thingy in Berlin where the Nazis smashed all the glass in the shop windows?" Nathan's slightly disreputable father, Buster, is a florist by trade. Both Buster and his doting wife -- a thuggish couple -- indulge the incorrigible but "creative."

Nathan. Nathan's crowd also includes his abandoned girlfriend, Jackee Wigram, and Zoe Rifaat, a television producer eager to secure Lyris's participation in a documentary about "neglected women artists." Among Lyris's own circle of friends are the wan Clovis Ingram, a bookstore owner; Clovis's possible love interest, Candy, the aging mistress of a former Tory M.P.; and

Clovis's neurotic ex-wife, Isobel. The sort of tawdry and goofy behavior perfected by the British royal family abounds. Readers will not easily keep track of all the players and their various foibles. Mackay's use of British slang seems pitch perfect, but it can add to the general confusion. If "prat" and "pong" and the now ubiquitous "shagged" are perhaps familiar, "sprogs" and "boffins" are more inscrutable. Still, Mackay is an uncanny ventriloquist, and her sometimes capricious narrative is filled with distinctive voices. Here is a world of recognizable modern solipsists who, given countless opportunities to make the small, necessary human gesture, unfailingly resort to the counterfeit. The image toward which the plot builds is that of the mountains of flowers piled around Kensington Palace in the aftermath of Diana's death. Such flowery tributes, *"The Artist's Widow"* suggests, are not a measure of heartfelt sympathy or esteem but of our most intimate failings and ultimate isolation. The distance that separates human beings is one that death permanently ratifies.

Paul Baumann is the executive editor of Commonweal.

musings

The Greater Common Good

by Arundhati Roy

Continued from last week

O slow a beast, you break its limbs. To slow a nation, you break its people. You rob them of volition. You demonstrate your absolute command over their destiny. You make it clear that ultimately it falls to you to decide who lives, who dies, who prospers, who doesn't. To exhibit your capability you show off all that you can do, and how easily you can do it. How easily you could press a button and annihilate the earth. How you can start a war, or sue for peace. How you can snatch a river away from one and gift it to another. How you can

green a desert, or fell a forest and plant one somewhere else. You use caprice to fracture a people's faith in ancient things-earth, forest, water, air. Once that's done, what do they have left?

Only you. They'll turn to you, because you're all they have. They'll love you even while they despise you. They'll trust you even though they know you well. They'll vote for you even as you squeeze the very breath from their bodies. They'll drink what you give them to drink. They'll breathe what you give them to breathe. They'll live where you dump their belongings. They have to. What else can they do? There's no

higher court of redress. You're their mother and their father. You're the Judge and the jury. You're the World. You're God.

Power is fortified not just by what it destroys, but also by what it creates. Not just by what it takes, but also by what it gives. And Powerlessness reaffirmed not just by the helplessness of those who have lost, but also by the gratitude of those who have (or think they have) gained.

This cold, contemporary cast of power is couched between the lines of noble-sounding clauses in democratic-sounding constitutions. It's wielded by

the elected representatives of an ostensibly free people. Yet no monarch, no despot, no dictator in any other century in the history of human civilisation has had access to weapons like these.

Day by day, river by river, forest by forest, mountain by mountain, missile by missile, bomb by bomb: almost without our knowing it, we are being broken.

Big Dams are to a Nation's Development what Nuclear Bombs are to its Military Arsenal. They're both weapons of mass destruction. They're both weapons governments use to control their own people. Both Twentieth Century emblems that mark a point in time

when human intelligence has outstripped its own instinct for survival. They're both malignant indications of civilisation turning upon itself. They represent the severing of the link, not just the link-the understanding-between human beings and the planet they live on. They scramble the intelligence that connects eggs to hens, milk to cows, food to forests, water to rivers, all to life and the earth to human existence.

Can we unscramble it? Maybe. Inch by inch. Bomb by bomb. Dam by dam. Maybe by fighting specific wars in specific ways. We could begin in the Narmada valley.

This July will bring the last monsoon of the Twentieth Century. The ragged army in the Narmada valley has declared that it will not move when the waters of the Sardar Sarovar reservoir rise to claim its lands and homes. Whether you love the dam or hate it, whether you want it or you don't, it is in the fitness of things that you understand the price that's being paid for it. That you have the courage to watch while the dues are cleared and the books are squared.

Our dues. Our books. Not theirs. Be there.

Courtesy of *Frontline*