



reflections

# Only Poets Know the World

by Salahuddin Akbar

**T**O some who think themselves -- they are ruled or guided by Venus and hence these Venusians concentrate and value most love, communication, beauty, and relationships, and are more concerned with living together in harmony, community, and loving cooperation -- are more likely to first think of Octavio Paz by remembering and soliloquizing his famous lines:

To love is two  
Always two  
Embrace and struggle  
Two is the longing to be one.

The others will think him most as Nobel prize winner. To some he is an essayist; people in Foreign Service will read him more of a diplomat (And interestingly we note our diplomats give a try at writing on purely certain issues, after their retirements, mostly with an underlying urge and motive. Then again mostly disclosing their encounters with remarkable personalities! But they have had so many exotic encounters to write upon. We are deprived then. To our surprise only a few non career diplomats have put their marks in their versatility as poet, essayist, columnist and writer.)

Octavio Paz was in his eighties last year and he was going as usual! May be I'm senescent but I'm not senile -- he might have professed.

Quite a few of us are likely to recall his book which was published 40 years ago and dwelled upon his native Mexico -- *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. But it is largely known that he represented his country twice -- and both times it was in India. First as an Attaché to the Mexican Embassy in 1951 and then, 11 years later, as Mexico's Ambassador.

His recently published *In Light of In-*

Octavio Paz's first taste of India was Bombay. Does the new change of name as Mumbai go well with his vivacious description of Bombay? As we see how gently it flows like a fall with Bombay (Bay of seven rivulets) ----- "Waves of heat; huge grey and red buildings, a Victorian London growing among palm trees and banyans like a recurrent nightmare, leprous walls, wide and beautiful avenues, huge unfamiliar trees, stinking alleyways.....public gardens overwhelmed by the heat, monkeys in the cornices of the buildings, shit and jasmine, homeless boys." India may seem so vividly brought with vignettes by him that even who have never been to India sure feel a thrill of spurious recognition. Paz does not give the critical readers further chance to do their job as he writes himself: "This book is not for the experts. It is the child not of knowledge but of love."

*dia*, translated by Eliot Weinberger, consists of Paz's personal reflections on India. It deserves to be deeply noted -- for it's a splendid series of essays, full of unexpected insights, by a cultural polymath that defines him again as a great writer.

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Should we wonder then if we happen

to see his knowledge is also based on profundity? For a many-sided Octavio Paz, the defining aspect of India is religious: the "deep wound" caused by the juxtaposition of Islamic monotheism with Hindu polytheism, which began with incursions of Muslim soldiers into Sind in the year 712. Paz has read the scriptures of both religions, and studied their art and architectures, which appear to have nothing in common. But he observes that Indian music notably influenced the Arab world: "Music was one of the things that united the two communities."

One of the most repellent things in India is its caste system that still prevails and make impediments to the human relationships apart from other ingredients in the society. But to the surprise of many observers Paz recognises that, although it had been an obstacle to democratic individualism, it has also promoted social stability. The caste is a circle of families, and "to renounce one's caste is like leaving the maternal belly that warms and shelters us from the outside world."

Next to this paradox what does he think of the Raj then? In a country where 179 languages and 544 dialects

are spoken, the great British achievement was, according to him "to bring a single government and a single law to all the Indian nations." The Congress decided that Hindi would be the national language of India; but this was never spoken by the majority of the people, and English has remained the official language of government. My visit to India three years ago gave me an up-dated impression of it. The false billing in a phone and fax shop run by a Bengali family in Calcutta got me entangled with their false billing. When I resorted to speaking English they communicated well in English. I got them subdued and the matter was instantly settled. The similar encounter I made in my buying an electric guitar there. In lieu of speaking not a single word in Bengali and kept our English fluency going I was generously given a nice discount or commission. It happened with all of our being Bengali. So the picture of the state of the language in all over India can be visualised well.

Perhaps it was largely due to the foresight of historian Macaulay the adoption of English was made in India. In 1935, he recommended the introduction of English system into India

in order to create a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern". Although Macaulay's contempt for Hindu and Muslim culture was unjustified, he was prescient in seeing English as the universal language of the future. But the impact of modern capitalist democracy on ancient cultures is also deplorable. Paz comments that "modern humans seem to have all come out of a factory, not a womb". Critics may feel sure that Paz is right in thinking that capitalist democracies have replaced fraternity with perpetual competitive struggle between individuals. Although leisure has increased, people don't what to do with their time (unless they have computers and newer soft wares installed!). Paz says that Marx's phrase about religion as the opiate of the people can be applied more accurately to television, "which will end up anaesthetising the human race, sunk in an idiotic beatitude".

There followed a student rebellions when Octavio Paz was passing his last year of his Ambassadorship in India in 1968. He considerable sympathy with the rebellious students was remarkable. Despite of his being disillusioned he had hoped that events would bring an

end to totalitarian regimes elsewhere and initiate a true socialist revolution. When students protests spread to Mexico, the Mexican government consulted Paz about how to deal with them. He was known to have sent a long dispatch expressing sympathy with the students' wish for reform and urging the government to abjure force and find a political solution. When the Mexican government used "bloody repression", Paz, feeling that he could do longer represent such a government, promptly resigned. The magic of India gripped him, as it seems to grip so many who serve there, and when he and his wife left, "It was as though we were leaving ourselves."

As I have mentioned at the outset that Paz is a many splendid parts, but it is his poetic vision which most powerfully informs his vision of the world. Although he was never a convinced surrealist, he was attracted by surrealism because of its union of poetry and action which for him, considered the essence of revolution. Poetry, his own and that of others, is a sustaining presence throughout, so that portraits of people, politics, scenery, history, and all the disparate aspects of this book are well woven into a seamless whole. While discussing disagreements between Tagore and Gandhi, Paz remarks: "It is useful to remember that poets, despite their reputation to the contrary, have generally shown good sense -- something one can not say of saints." Through conjuring up his acute sense and sensibility Octavio Paz brings a continent thrillingly alive and makes the readers feel that only poets really comprehend the world.

(The writer is an official of the External Publicity Wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)

poems

## Poems by Jibananda Das

Translated by Fakrul Alam

### Poems from Ruposhi Bangla (Beautiful Bengal)

Knowing How These Fields will Not be Hushed That Day  
(Shei Din Ei Math)

Knowing how these fields will not be hushed that day --  
Under these rivers and stars  
I will still dream on --  
When, if ever, are precious dreams and desires cast off in this world?  
Because I will disappear one day  
Will not dewdrops ever wet the chalta flowers  
In surges of soft scent?  
Will not the homely owl hoot for its mate?  
When, if ever, are precious dreams and desires cast off in this world!

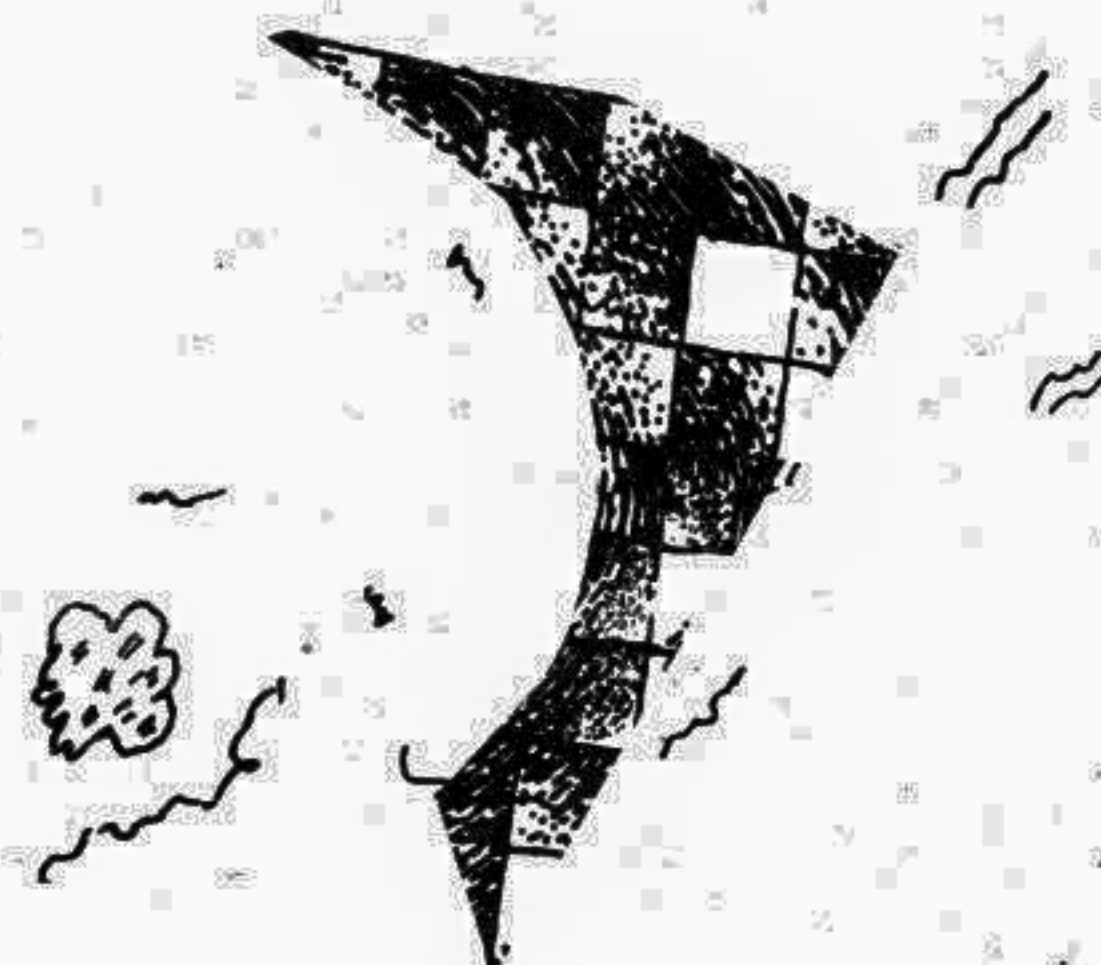
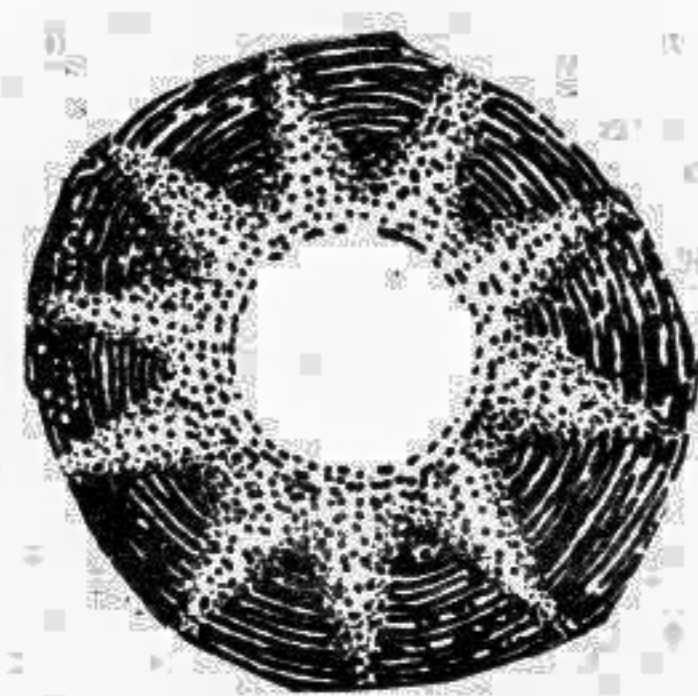
Quiet lights -- moist smells -- murmurings everywhere;  
Ferryboats come to moor very close to sandbanks;  
These tales of the world live on forever,  
Though Assyria is dust -- Babylon in ashes.

### Shuronjona (the Sweet and Pleasing One)

Shuronjona, you are still with us in this our world;  
A woman as old as this world,  
You opened your dark eyes to take in the blue heavens;  
Saw Greek, Hindu, Phoenician systems all spread out,  
You heard the foam break on beautiful city strands  
What did you want? What did you get? -- all have disappeared

We have all grown older  
The heavens have dimmed somewhat;  
But the sea is still blue; shells still spot intricately;  
A bird's song sounds lovely even now.  
Humans still need others -- replacing their dazzling dead  
God with fruits of other endeavors.

I remember how in the breeze of a distant star-filled night,  
The sage Ashaka' son Mahendra by my side,  
I set forth on a huge and turbulent ocean, a last desire in me,  
But I could not persuade anyone to believe  
My desire was not for holy orders, power, or homage,  
But for more light: for a woman's heartfelt love for a man.



As if to weary mariners of all overcast oceans  
In a sea humming in the breeze like bees,  
Coming back to a brave new world  
From one lost in Mediterranean seas --  
You are the nightly lament of the dead of that lovely sea shore  
You loved me with your body, and yet this morning all is uproar.

### Swapna (Dreams)

Manuscript by me, next to a gray lamplight,  
I was sitting silently;  
Dewdrops were shedding slowly;  
From a neem branch I saw that most forlorn of birds alight

And fly far into the mist -- from mist to even farther into the mist.  
Did the drift from its wings blow my lamp out?  
In the darkness slowly I grope for my match;  
When I light my lamp guess whose face will I glimpse?

Whose face? -- behind amlaki branches  
The horn-shaped blue moon had one day viewed that scene;  
Had seen this graying manuscript one day, alas,  
That face is grayest this day in the world's memories.

Yet when one day all the light of this world fades,  
When all the stories of this world have been told,  
When men will be no more, when only their dreams will remain;  
That face and I'll live in that dream's deepest vein.

### Wristwatch

Shattered by the canon's wrath  
Many a sacrificial offering lie stunned this night  
Below the mountain -- some with watches on their wrists.  
The hands of time keep ticking in them slowly;  
Under the moonlight these eerie sentries  
Will talk on for a while --  
Their mechanical hearts seem to glow with desire,  
Sucking in the bright starlight.  
Under olive branches dewdrops keep piling up,  
Far away the ocean sounds,  
Like a white shawl -- desolate -- the wind wails.  
Their life will draw on for a moment or two more  
And then slow down -- slow down steadily to a stop  
Till they wake up again in the infinite darkness of boundless starlight.

### Sourakarojjwal (Solar Brilliance)

These days, people think nothing of reaching for the stars  
on someone else's shoulder.  
In some bend of the road, or where the river breaks its banks,

they build their worlds;  
Yet their ways -- religions, wealth, work, voices, acts  
-- Or revolutions these will bring about  
Gather apace -- harvests take place -- and yet locusts have had their day --  
Ruin is always round the corner.  
Yet, stars, rivers, the sun, women, and golden harvests can't be false.  
Only humans can end the greyness and fear  
Casting a shadow on the human heart; the third fourth -- and all internationals --  
Can only build break build capable workaday man.

### Mohagodhuli (The Immense Twilight)

The sluggish cart creaks with its load of golden hay -- the evening light fades;  
Black, blue, yellow birds flap wings in cornfield stores;  
The pale path, dust, and flies blend somnolently with the sky;  
The declining sun spreads itself feebly on pea fields

And then lies down; now in solitude it feels its blood craving sleep;  
Liking the looks of this last field its eyes flare up, dim,  
And flare up again; only remembering the pleasing black smell of charcoal  
Will make it relent one day and relieve itself of its fire.

Somewhere charters, pacts, commissions, plans run their course;  
Why then the clangor of slander, fear, malice, spite and spilled blood?  
When Buddha died my heart put this question to that slender mendicant nun  
And then became mum -- till now it remains mute in the presence of time.

From Bela Abela Kalbela (In Time, Out of Time, And a Time Apart)

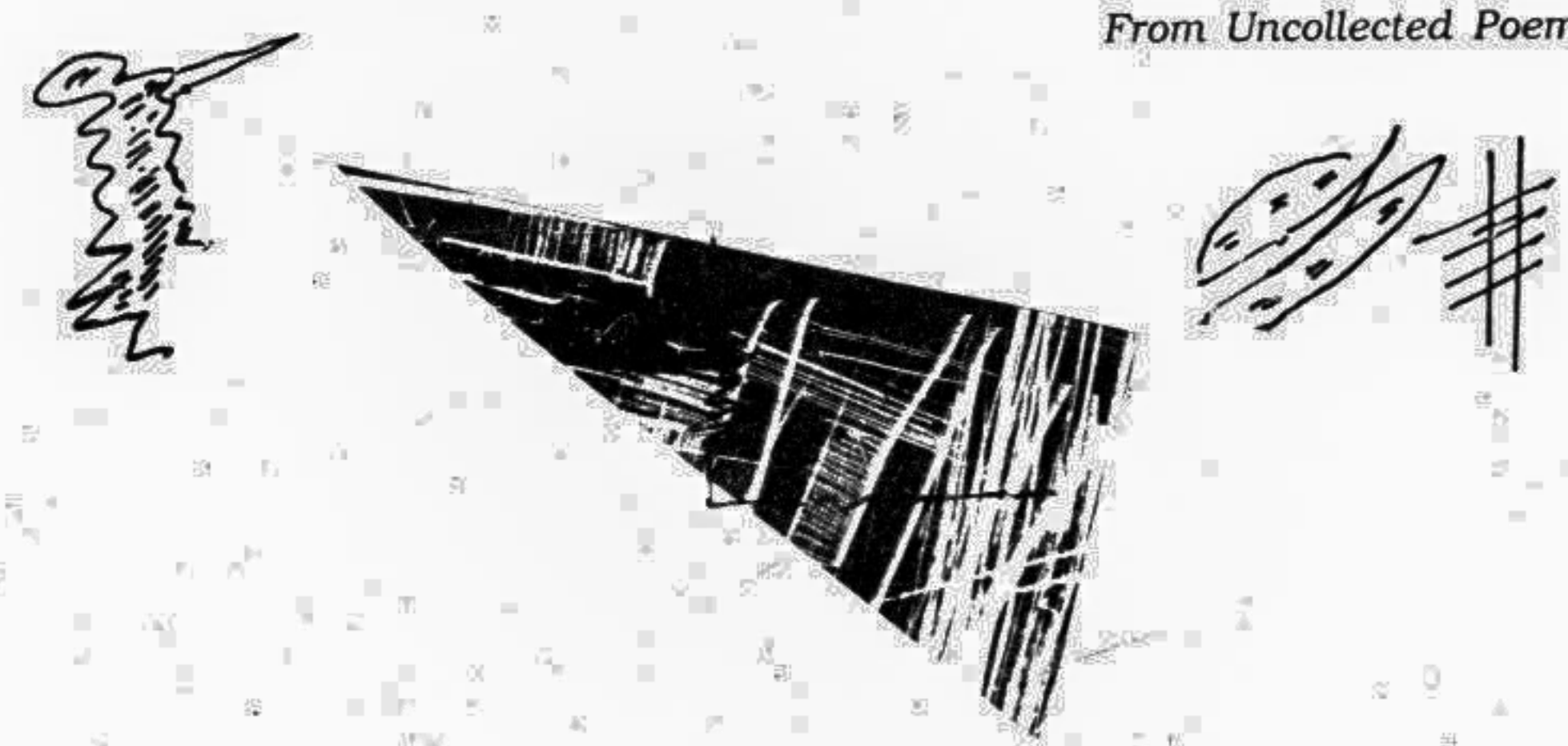
### Kartiler Bhore (In Kartik's Late Autumnal Morning)

The dew that fell  
On the eyes, face, and hair  
In Kartik's late autumnal morning  
Fell because a few shaliks shed themselves

Three shaliks skimming over the Amlaki tree  
In late autumnal sun and mist,  
Like three women my heart had come to know;  
Are they part of the sun? Or did they come to earth

Molting their feet in the sun's sandals  
To fly away from earth again?  
I have seen many a shalik in my lifetime  
But where can those three shaliks be?

From Uncollected Poems



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