

book review

Labour of Love

by Shamsad Mortuza.

As an Honours student of English Literature with an aversion towards ready-made notes, I divided my textbooks into two categories: First, those with lot of reference books, and second, those with a very few references, if not none at all. The second type is the worst nightmare for any student. Bacon's Essays belonged to the second category. I remember getting hold of a second-hand, overwrought book on Bacon from Nilkhet that had a rather 'give-me-a-break' kind of personality. In retrospect, I think I followed Bacon's maxim — "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested" — and tasted his essays enough to be tested in my Finals. My adversity towards Sir Francis Bacon at that time was nothing personal.

A rereading of Bacon's essay on "Adversity" help me understand Seneca's paradox that "the good things that belong to adversity are to be admired." Likewise, I am beginning to admire Bacon following my fresh reading of his essays in Kawsar Hussain's translation. The neat translation of Bacon's Essays just came out from the country's leading publishing house UPL with a quite attractive personality. The "purple-stained" jacket with "country-green" borders is suggestive of the "draught of vintage": the rare freshness of a canonical text.

I browsed through the translation with a renewed feeling on the importance of Bacon in the curriculum of the English Departments. Bacon provides an incisive insight into the facts of life. The issues that Bacon dealt in his es-

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says were true in the Elizabethan Age, and some of them are still relevant. And of course there are issues that need to be contested. For example, in his essay on "Marriage and Single Life," Bacon observes that "Wives are young men's mistresses, companion for middle age, and old men's nurses." (I will let the readers form their judgement on such a Baconesque axiom).

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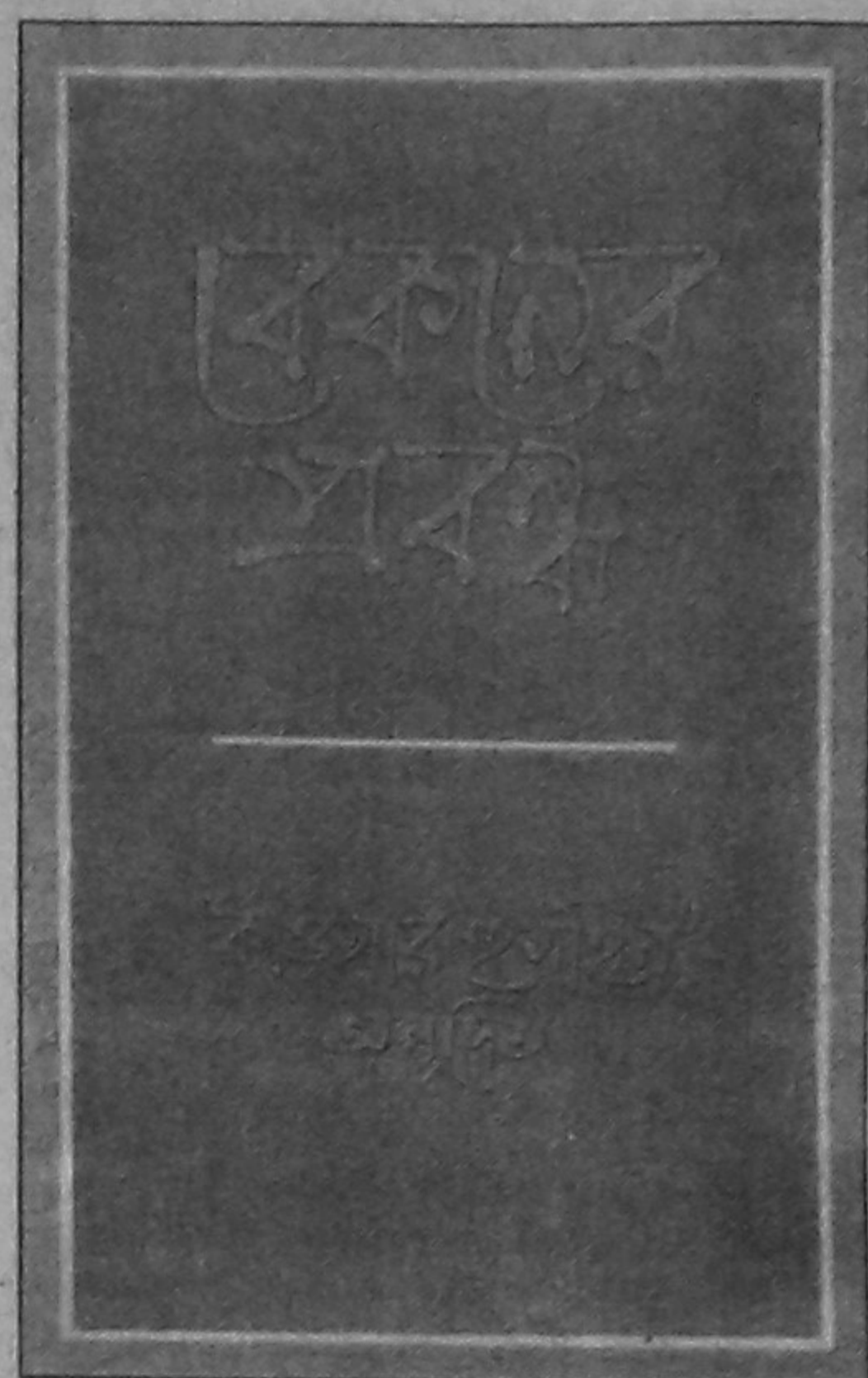
Hussain's grasp over both Bangla and English are commendable. His language flows well. He has been sincere to the syntactic pattern of the original, and at the same time tried to capture the spirit of the essays. The footnotes provided by the translator are detailed and will help an enthusiastic reader quench her or his general queries about Bacon's allusions. Specially, for literature-majors these footnotes will hone their critical perspectives. One common problem of an English major studying a literature foreign to her or his culture has always been to put things in its contexts. The age-old syllabi in our graduation programmes hardly offer our students the opportunity to interlace texts. Consequently, we, as students, tend to see things in isolation and each text appears to be an island. This evil is further contributed by the fact that even in our classrooms we are not allowed to engage in dialogues with the text.

However, this is not to say that every foreign text should be read in translation that is loaded with footnotes. Footnotes often hamper the flow of reading and deter a reader from deriving pleasure out of a text. And an avid reader should never miss the privilege of enjoying the text in its original form. After all, translation involves the process of transcending the barriers of languages and cultural coding. Since translation, like reading, is a subjective and interpretive act, it demands a comprehensive knowledge on all the languages and cultures involved on the part of both the translator and the reader.

It is up to us as readers to judge whether the translator has opted the poetic license to condense or expand the original ideas. Or whether the translator's interpretations are value-laden? With English as our second language, reading an English text in Bangla translation thus becomes a task both easy and hard. It is easy to comprehend the sense in our own lingua franca. On the

other hand, it is difficult to be conscious and alert of mistranslation or any sort of deviation that may take place in the text. The translator has included 13 original essays as addendum to his work to give the reader a feel of Bacon's writings as well as to complement the reading of the translation.

One of the greatest inclusions of the book is the long critical introduction. The introduction surveys a wide range of issues involving the life of Bacon and his literary attainments, the genesis of essay as a genre, and position of the "Father of English Essay" in the historical context. In the introduction, the translator admitted that he refrained from translating some technical terms namely those architectural jargons of "On Buildings" or gardening terms of "On Garden" fearing distortion. However, one feels that as a reader we expect the translator to carry on some research and make some efforts in making those technical issues available in the translated language. After all, it is



Baconer Probandha (Bacon's Essays)
Translated by Kawsar Hussain
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often those technicalities that often lead a student to resort to a translation. Otherwise, the book is highly recommended for students and serious researchers working on Essay as a genre or European history. It sure is a handy reference book to have on the desk.

essay

Nazrul As Seen by Mahbub Ul Alam

by Mohit Ul Alam

BOTH of them became soldiers in early life. Mahbub Ul Alam (1898-1981) joined the First World War from Chittagong and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) did the same from Calcutta. The former is a renowned fictionist, the writer of such masterpieces as *Mofizon* (Eng. Trans. *The Story of A Bengali Belle* by Moyeen Ul Alam) and *Momenar Jabanbandi* (Eng. Trans. *Confessions of A Believer* by Lila Roy, Annada Sankar Roy's wife, who is an American white) and the compiler of the first documented history of the liberation war of Bangladesh, entitled *Bangaleer Muktiyuddhaher Itibritiya*, who, according to a considerable number of critics, has been largely denied the critical acclaim due him, and the latter is of course the incomparable doyen of Bangla literature. Behind their joining the war youthfulness and courage were a major incentive, but more came from their desire to gather experience from an untrodden path of life.

In April 1917 Mahbub reached Karachi on his way to the frontier in the Middle East. The Turkish Sultanate won an important battle at Kut al Amara, exploiting a strategic mistake by the popular British general Amundsen. The British Raj needed to recruit soldiers from all over India to reinforce its forces in the Middle East. As a result the 49th East Bengal Regiment was formed and Mahbub joined it and was transported to the Iraq frontier on 1st July, 1917. In September 1919, while Mahbub and his peers were fighting at Kiork, the capital of Kurdistan, a hilly stronghold of the Turkish, suddenly the ceasefire was declared. Mahbub writes about his feelings at the time:

"After three years of continuous hard struggle comes this ceasefire. Nothing in me, neither my body nor my mind, wanted to believe it. But, all on a sudden, like a wave rushed in the memory of my home. The great push of the war made us forget our fathers' names. Now I could remember my father's name, its features and appearance floated in my mind. My mother's image, that of a lady busily cooking in the kitchen came afresh to my mind, and I also remembered the faces of my brothers. And, above all, I could remember the face of that young girl who was always as alert as a cat, and whose two eyes could not be seen together at the same time, because when one eye remained exposed then the other one remained hidden behind the veil" (*Paltane*, p. 46. Trans. by the present writer).

Even though the ceasefire was declared, it took some time to get implemented. Thus Mahbub was finally released from the regiment in September, 1920. In the meanwhile, while at the front, he heard from one of his friends called Manaranjan Das, who returned to the front after a short spell of leave in Sylhet, that at the Karachi depot he saw one Havildar called Kazi who had kept the whole depot charmed by his songs and poetry. Manaranjan also told Mahbub that he saw Havildar Kazi sit-

Those who are familiar with Mahbub Ul Alam's writings know that his style is what one understands by 'brevity is the soul of wit'. That is, creating a sea in a dot was the method he singularly pursued in his writings. His masterpiece, *Mofizon*, acclaimed to be one of the finest fictions in Bangla literature, is less than fifty pages in volume. In portraying the character of Nazrul, Mahbub has preserved his characteristic precision of details.

ting with a harmonium in front of him and singing in his bass voice while consuming an enormous supply of tea and betel-leaf. But when Mahbub reached Karachi on his way to Chittagong, he did not find Kazi at the depot as the latter had already been released from duties and left for Calcutta.

In 1998, on the occasion of Mahbub Ul Alam's 100th birth anniversary, The Bangladesh Co-operative Book Society, in a commendable gesture, published two books by Mahbub, namely *Paltane* and *Rang Berang*, where many of his unpublished writings are printed. Also printed in these two books are as many as four articles by Mahbub on Nazrul which are significant both for the light they throw on the then literary scene of Chittagong, or more particularly, on Nazrul's relation with the Alam Family of Chittagong, and for removing two confusions about Nazrul's life. These four articles have the headings as "Sonar Nazrul" (Nazrul, as he has been heard of), "Dekhar Nazrul" (Nazrul, as he had been seen), "Janar Nazrul" (Nazrul, as he is known), and "Nazrul Preksha" (Nazrul Perspective).

Those who are familiar with Mahbub Ul Alam's writings know that his style is what one understands by 'brevity is the soul of wit'. That is, creating a sea in a dot was the method he singularly pursued in his writings. His masterpiece, *Mofizon*, acclaimed to be one of the finest fictions in Bangla literature, is less than fifty pages in volume. In portraying the character of Nazrul, Mahbub has preserved his characteristic precision of details. The strokes are simple but strong, and Nazrul is cast into a vivid relief. However, as both of them were contemporaries, what also surfaces in Mahbub's writings is a comparative assessment between his family situation and that of Nazrul's. Both of them came of dignified middle middle-class families where Islamic traditions held sway. Mahbub writes:

"Our age was for the Muslims to get settled in Bengali culture. ... In 1835, the Company (British) replaced Persian with English as the lingua franca... but in Maulavi and Kazi families the old tradition was still going on. Kalamullah Sharif and Islamiat studies for religious reasons, and Persian for education-state-social and cultural reasons" (*Rang Berang*, pp. 74-75. Trans. by the present writer).

Through another pointer Mahbub also explains why he thinks that it was not congenial for Nazrul's talent to have participated in the war direct.

"Nazrul is junior to me by one year. But, because of my passing the matriculation, going to college, and having got married in the same year, my life was completely changed. Nazrul at the same time was passing through his

youth at Trishal Ramdariapur School. And when he was reading in Searsoi Raj School, he became a full-blooded youth, and was grouping his way through the first arousal of his poetic self. At that time he got recruited and went to Karachi.

"The way that a soldier is defined that he has to do murderous activities, Nazrul could never become a soldier in that sense. His victories had already started. Nobody could but love him. Coming in touch with his genius everybody was impressed. So he was very naturally well established at the Paltan in the division of the quarter-master. The position of a havildar at the quarter-master office suited him well. His quick promotion from a sepoy to a lance-nayak, from lance-nayak to nayak, from nayak to havildar, it is his uncommon character that made the rise so easy" (*Paltane*, p. 47).

Coming back to Calcutta, Nazrul felt drawn to two places of the Bengal: Comilla and Chittagong. He had established martial relationship with Comilla. And for his attraction toward Chittagong, two personalities were responsible — Habibullah Bahar and Didarul Alam.

Habibullah Bahar and his sister Shamsunnahar were the grand-children of Abdul Aziz B.A. through his daughter. The brother and sister lives at the maternal grand-father's house called "Bahar-Nahar Kutir" at Tamakumundi. Habibullah was a prominent football player. He was also a leader of the Muslim League.

And, on the other hand, Didarul Alam was the third brother of the Alam Family. He was enormously talented but died at the age of 26 of tuberculosis.

Didar, who was a common friend of Nazrul, Habibullah Bahar, Abul Fazal, and Jasimuddin, had left the madrasa at the call of non-cooperation movement by Gandhi. After leaving the madrasa he took up the job of a cab driver for sometime. Meanwhile he had published many poems and short-stories before he went to Calcutta and made friends with Nazrul. Having spent a considerable period with Nazrul, he left for Rangoon (Yangon) and started editing a Bengali journal called *Yuger Alo* (The Light of the Age), which was quarterly in the beginning and then turned monthly, and was published by his elder brother, Mahbub Ul Alam. The year was 1925. When Tagore visited Rangoon in 1929, Didar wrote the draft of the welcome address to be read at the reception of the poet. But, as Mahbub writes:

"When his friends and well-wishers came to Didar to take him to Tagore, he refused, saying, 'I'll see him from distance.'" (*Rang Berang*, p. 76).

Late 1928, Habibullah Bahar brought Nazrul to their Tamakumundi house. Throongs of people came to see Nazrul. Mahbub also came.

"I also went to see him. He was in his all-victorious mood. Many had a curiosity to see how we would talk to each other. Nazrul had mentioned 'Mahbub' enthusiastically. But when we stood face to face, we realized that we hadn't seen each other before" (*Rang Berang*, p. 76).

After this meeting, Nazrul accepted the hospital of the Alam brothers at their Fatehabad home on 25th and 26th January in 1929. From his reflections on this visit by Nazrul, we see Mahbub making a two-fold assertion that Nazrul had never had physically to go to the warfront, and that his staying at the village of Fatehabad might have inspired him to write the famous poem, "Batayan Pashe Gubak Tarur Sari" ("The rows of betel-nut trees by the window").

At first it was believed that since Nazrul wrote poems on the features of Middle East landscape like "The Shat'l Arab," he might have personal experiences of those places. Mahbub dispels this wrong impression:

He [Nazrul] joined the Paltan after me, and went up to Karachi. I stayed at the Mesopotamia warfront for three years at a stretch. It was not possible for us to return before 1920. On the other hand, after the ceasefire was declared, Havildar Nazrul returned to Calcutta in 1919 and put himself up in the office of "Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samity". So I had no opportunity to make his acquaintance at the Paltan" (*Rang Berang*, p. 123).

Then, how did the poet write such excellent poems as "The Shat'l Arab"? In one of his poems, "Bhasha o Tchanda" ("Language and Rhyme") Rabindranath Tagore writes that the poet's mind (here, the poet Valmiki's mind) creates Ayo-dha which is truer than the actual Ayo-dha, the birthplace of Rama. Regarding Nazrul the same claim had been made by Mahbub:

"In the meantime, the all-conquering poet's eyes were washed with a magical light. The Karachi depot had become his pit. His body might have remained in Karachi, but his extraordinary imagination had been soaked by the valour of war heroes. With his mind's eyes he roamed about the places around Shat'l Arab (where I was posted), and at the battlefields of Turkey, one time fighting beside Anwar Pasha and Kamal Pasha, and another time at the Verdun Trench with the allied forces" (*Rang Berang*, p. 123).

Nazrul's rebel spirit could easily implant it self in objects and things that he did not physically visit.

Mahbub's second postulate is con-

nected with the poem, "Batayan Pashe Gubak Torur Sari" — its composing time and the inspiration behind it.

Gubak Toru is the betel-nut tree. The homestead of the Alam Family at Fatehabad had a phenomenal overgrowth of this tree, much of which is still in evidence. Mahbub's reminiscence catches the atmosphere:

"Amidst the garden of the betel-nut trees was our small bamboo front-house. On a moonlit night, opening a window, we would see the ravishing mystery of nature, the betel-nut trees bathing in the moonlight looked as if they were human beings" (*Rang Berang*, p. 80).

Elsewhere, the description is more vivid:

"Didar had brought Nazrul from Tamakumundi to our house at Fatehabad on 25th January, 1929. Our home was beside a stream called 'Khagaria'. The whole area was famous for betel-nut trees.

"There was a betel-nut tree gardener in front of our house. Our house was a small bamboo cottage. Nazrul stayed in this house, and we also stayed with him.

"As it was a bright moonlit night, we sighted a wonderful thing in the garden. The betel-nut trees shone in the moonlight as if they were wrapped around by large silvery snakes. When the tree tops hitched mildly in the wind, these snakes, as if roused to life, started playing.

"Opening the window at night Nazrul saw this sight and got absolutely entranced. In ecstasy, he murmured, 'Ah-ha-ha, what have I seen!' (*Rang Berang*, p. 125).

In the morning, Mahbub saw Nazrul engaged deeply in writing, as if possessed. "From the heap of many written sheet," writes Mahbub, "Nazrul brought out the poem, 'Batayan Pashe Gubak Torur Sari' and read it out to our grandma who was absolutely enthralled" (*Rang Berang*, p. 125).

A little doubt hovers over this entry. Because Mahbub doesn't say that he actually saw Nazrul writing this very poem, the fact that phrase 'brought out' is not tantamount in meaning to the verb 'wrote' intrigues us, though Mahbub admits that he read the poem later (how late, it is not told though), and asserts that he still remembered the frenzied condition of Nazrul in which he saw him that morning (*Rang Berang*, p. 82).

In 1951, when Mahbub was working in Khulna as a sub-registrar, he went to attend a Nazrul birth-anniversary function at Bagerhat as the chief guest. A gentleman named Sushil Jana read a paper at the function. Mahbub quotes Jana as having written: "I went to see the ailing poet. I opened a book of poetry by him in front of him. On the open page

it was the poem, 'Batayan Pashe...' Seeing that poem the poet cried out 'Chattagram! Chattagram!' (*Rang Berang*, p. 128).

Needless to say, the poem, brought to the poet's mind in a flash the memory of the betel-nut tree-surrounded village, Fatehabad.

However, day later, that is on 26th January, the poet was given a reception by the Alam brothers. The first paragraph of the address of honour went in the following manner:

"Poet Nazrul Islam
With regards
O soldier poet.

The day the flame of rebellion sparked on your fire-flute, we four brothers here at this far place accepted you in our hearts. We recognised you that day in your fiery-sport. Today, we have also recognised you in your 'Bulbul' (nightingale) songs — you are our very familiar friends, our ever restless company forever. We will not demean you by congratulating, we will just hold you close to our hearts and whisper to your our deepest word" (*Rang Berang*, p. 126).

Nazrul left Fatehabad the following day.

The next meeting between Nazrul and Mahbub took place in 1933 at a literature conference in Raozan. At the time Mahbub's war-travelogue, *Paltan, Jibaner Smriti* (The Memories of the warfront) was being serially published in the monthly *Mohammadi*. In the meantime Didar had already died on 28th December, 1929. Nazrul, on his way to Raozan, got down at Fatehabad and offered prayer at Didar's grave.

Then in 1951, Mahbub, accompanied by his friends Kazi Abdul Wadud and Poet Abdul Kadir, went to see the ailing Nazrul at Calcutta.

Mahbub recollects:
"As a child is made to sit after being washed, dressed, combed and fed, so was Nazrul seated.

"Seeing me his eyes momentarily beamed in joy, as if he had recognised me, as if he would murmur something. But instantly the light in his eyes died down. He began to turn up the pages of a book, as if he had been looking for something. He was suffering from brain paralysis. Pramila was lying in an easy chair in the same room. Her lower part was paralysed. But her face looked sombre like a lily flower" (*Rang Berang*, p. 129).

For the rest of his life, the more Mahbub remembered Nazrul the more he felt as if he always heard the poet's ecstatic murmuring on the moonlit night at Fatehabad. "Ah-ha-ha, what have I seen!" In his opinion, and that of ours too, the poet has captured the magical beauty of the betel-nut trees washed by the moonlight in his poem, "Batayan pashe..." Mahbub writes that this very poem has forged the eternal bond between him and the poet. That is exactly the matter.

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