

in memoriam

Mohordi — Unity with Divinity

By Milia Ali

I remember meeting Mohordi for the first time in her house in Guru Palli in Santiniketan. I was a Bangladeshi "refugee" and an aspiring Tagore singer. When she heard that I had come all the way to seek her guidance to help me do the only thing that I thought I could do for my country — sing to raise people's awareness about Bangladesh, she simply said in her soft lilting voice: *Tumi amar kachhei thakbe* (You will stay with me). I was already moonstruck with the beauty, elegance and gentle strength of this Tagore legend and could hardly believe that she had accepted me — a plain, ordinary, unknown girl from an as-yet-unrecognised country as her protégé. But it was true and thus began my spiritual journey with the great maestro.

KANIKA Banerjee! In the eyes of the world: a legend, the greatest exponent of Tagore's music and a singer *par excellence* who lifted Rabindrasangeet to unprecedented heights! But as I look back, reflecting about "my" Mohordi, I see her as an unparalleled guru, a compassionate mentor, a loving friend and, above all, a complete human being in the real sense of the word. Many sweet, beautiful, mundane and sublime moments that I shared with her flash through my memory cells. It is difficult to write about Mohordi because where does my story with her begin? As Milia, the awestruck child, listening to Kanika Banerjee singing: *Oje mane na mana...* and in her intimate solitude trying to imitate the doleful and melodious repetition of the words *na, na, na?* Or as Milia, the wide eyed, melancholic girl in 1971, committed to the cause of Bengali nationalism, seeing Mohordi in person for the first time and immediately accepting her as the role model for Bengali renaissance? Let me start with the Liberation War in 1971 — because this also marks the genesis of my inner consciousness as an individual...

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Any bond which is formed in adversity will outlive time and tide. The war of liberation was like a storm in my life which swept away the paraphernalia and left me anchored to my roots. And my meeting and subsequent relationship with Mohordi was one such root which was firmly entrenched in my life.

Tagore's music is not merely tune and lyrics — it symbolises the virtues of reverence and secularism which characterise Tagore's own life and work. Mohordi, a direct disciple of Tagore, put these values into practice during the traumatic period of the creation of Bangladesh when she lovingly welcomed many Bangladeshis, all of whom had only one thing in common: a dream that they would create a country which would represent all that is essentially good and beautiful in the Bengali consciousness! I remember Eid day in 1971 — I was staying with Mohordi and Brenda (her husband). Both of them insisted that Eid would be celebrated in their house. All the Bangladeshis in Santiniketan were invited. Mohordi sat with me as I said my Eid prayers and we cooked *pulao* and lamb curry (a rarity in the ashram). That day Kanika Banerjee transformed herself into an excited, down-to-earth, ordinary woman trying to absorb all the Eid customs and enjoying every moment of the fun and laughter. But the spiritual element was always present and my ultimate Eid gift was a song — Atul Prasad's: *Amar rakhte jodi upon ghore, bishsho ghore petam na thain* (Oh Lord if you had kept me hidden within the four walls of my own house, I would not have found my true place in this universe.) How apt!

Mohordi's teaching method was unique. She never stopped her students and made them repeat lines. She would sing softly with us and as we progressed through the song she would gradually point out the details and the nuances. But she always said *"El to hochchhe"* (Yes, yes you are doing it right!). Although it never was right like hers! Through gentle words and demonstrations she would walk us



Tomaye notun kore pabo bole harai khone khon

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through the intricacies of Tagore's music which she had mastered to perfection. The interesting thing is that I never felt that I had learnt any song completely because each time I heard her sing it, I would discover something new (a *meer*, or a *sparsha shor*, or a voice modulation) that I had missed the previous time. Yet I never thought I was a failure because she would say *"Tumi tomar moton"* (You sing like yourself). Such was her magic that she made all her students believe in their full potential!

Later, much later, in 1993, I went back to Santiniketan and Mohordi for a year. I was then a mature woman. But the discovery process continued whenever I was with her. This time I was ready to absorb much more in spirit and soul because I had also walked the diverse journey of life and had more capacity to understand the

mysteries of Tagore's creative compositions. My instrument was still Mohordi — I held her hand and lived the dream of the *shoponocharini* (one who dwells in dreams), whom we search but can seldom find. Through the songs that she taught me I understood what it felt like when the keya flower stealthily creeps into your inner core on a cloudy day (*Chhaya ghanache bone bone*); how one can be liberated through destruction and pain (*Tumi kon bhangonero pothe ele...*); and why you have to let go of all good things in life because nothing is permanent, even life itself (*Ja hariye jae*). As Mohordi and I would sing in unison, whether it was in her small verandah or half reclining in bed — she humming and I listening, the words and the notes of Tagore's compositions became real and I could feel every syllable vibrating with life. With the help of

her long explications of each composition, I partially unravelled the mysteries of life itself. What a privilege it was to catch a glimpse of eternity through the eyes of this great personality!

Introspection is necessary in any art form. Through introspection alone can an artist reach divinity. However the conflict between artistic growth for money or accolade and growth to fulfill an internal yearning is a constant battle that all of us artists face. Both paths, taken independently of each other, are dangerous unless the artist is constantly aware of the fact that the first may tempt one to deviate from true art and the second may not lead to professional perfection. Mohordi's musical life was a conscious effort to unify these two paths. In fact this unity is the divinity she sought to achieve and succeeded in achieving. On the one hand her songs attracted everyone (the old and the young, the ordinary and the sublime, the pragmatic and the romantic) because of its perfection and beautiful rendition; on the other hand it never deviated from its true purpose which is to ascend toward the highest level of spiritual freedom. The goal of all great artists! Mohordi's music also succeeded in merging two contradictory forces — it raised her Bengali consciousness and yet it never detracted from her other consciousness that she was an individual, a part of a world that is vast and encompassing. Hence the ability to accept all those who approached her with love — without any prejudice or reservation. Remembering Mohordi as I last saw her in February this year, frail in body yet astutely alert in mind, I am filled with wonder as to how she achieved this unattainable task!

Let me end my random reflections, which have hardly done justice to this great maestro, with a touching story. It was a languid spring morning on Dol day in Santiniketan (1994). Mohordi and I were sitting and chatting casually in the "middle room" of her house where she always sat on a certain chair turned to a certain angle overlooking the back garden. There was a ring in the front door and I went to open it. A man and a woman stood outside and they literally begged me to ask Mohordi if she would see them only for a few minutes. Although Mohordi seldom refused to see visitors unless she was physically unwell, I could feel a slight reluctance because she was tired of meeting the hordes of Dol crowd in Santiniketan. But she agreed to see the lady. The woman touched Mohordi's feet and started crying. She said: *"Didi, we lost our only child two years back and unable to cope with our sorrow, my husband and I left home to become sanyasis. But we could not find comfort even in the great expanse of the Himalayas. So we came back to our sansar once again. However, peace and tranquility still eluded us. One evening we heard you sing: Tomaye notun kore pabo bole harai khone khon, o mor bhalobashar dhon."* (Oh my treasure of love, I lose you momentarily only to find you again in some new, unknown form). Suddenly our agonising grief melted away to give place to a soothing, silent pain. It seemed as if we had discovered the quintessence of life and death. We have been waiting since then to touch your feet and thank you for freeing us from the shackles of agony! We were all speechless and I could feel hot tears trickling down my cheeks. I looked up to see Mohordi crying and so was the young woman! For a few moments I held "infinity in the palm of my hand" and understood what poets mean when they say that true music can melt stones and rent apart a parched sky to bring thunder and shower!

On this auspicious occasion of Tagore's birthday, when Mohordi is no longer with us in this world, I salute her for her contribution to music and the larger world of art and thank her for the values and the teachings she has imparted to me with the humble realisation of how little I could give in return!

poem

Two Love Poems by Rabindranath Tagore

Unfathomable

Translated by Fakrul Alam

Do you fail to comprehend me?
Your eyes view me plaintively,
Straining to fathom me,
Like the moon looking steadily
At the depths of the sea.

I haven't hidden anything from you
All have is for you to view.
Myself I have revealed;
I am all before you on show
Is that why you won't understand me?

If it were merely a pearl
I'd break it into bits and pieces,
Weaving these into a chain carefully
I'd place them on your neck lovingly.

If it were merely a flower,
Beautiful, and delicately shaped,
Blossoming at the break of day,
Swaying in the spring breeze —
I'd pluck it from its stalk carefully
And place it on your black tresses lovingly.

But what I spread before you, dear, is my heart
Can one its depths from its banks keep apart?
Too deep to figure out, too enigmatic a retreat,
How can one its past reveal or its future predict?
Nevertheless, dear, it's yours to queen over!

What would I have you believe?
About what in my innermost being,
Keeps ringing, day and night,
In silent music and wordless stillness
Spreading across the heavens,
Like tunes pervading the night.

If it were only a question of happiness,
A smile emerging on the lips
Would give rise to immense bliss
Conveying instantly the heart's tidings
Obviating the need for speech.

If it were only a question of grieving
Of glistening eyes, and a few tears dropping,
Of pale lips, and a sad face —
You'd see the pain in me easily,
You'd read my thoughts instantly.

But love, dear, has overwhelmed my heart —
There is no limiting its sorrow or delight
Always languishing, and yet always glowing,
Day and night its perplexities leave me reeling,
And so I fail in the act of communicating.

But what if you don't understand me?
Keep me always in sight, judge me by ever-changing light
Study me thoroughly day and night.
Fathom out the parts of me and my heart that you can —
Who could ever the whole comprehend?



Endless Love

It's you I seem to have loved in innumerable forms, endlessly,
Age after age, in each reincarnation, eternally.
My rapt heart has forever woven song-garlands just for you —
Offerings you've gracefully put on your neck for view,
Age after age, in each reincarnation, eternally.

The more I hear those olden tales, of ancient love's agonies,
Age-old stories of lovers meeting or separating;
I keep gazing at the distant past, till at last,
Piercing night's darkness your image assumes
The form of the pole star so indelibly impressed on the mind.

We two have been borne along by the current of our love
And have floated here from the source of all passions.
We two have frolicked in the midst of millions of lovers
Sharing their pangs at partings, their blushes at
assignments —
Putting on ever-new guises for love's eternal endeavors.

Today my love's age-old quest has found its final rest,
And love's entire legacies lie heaped at your feet.
The whole universe's bliss and sorrows, the pleasures of life,
And all past loves have become one with our love —
All songs of poets of all ages too!