

INTERVIEW

Frustration to hope, broken heart to harmony

Ziaul Karim of The Daliy Star talks to Poet Shahed Rahman

THE Daily Star (DS): Thematically speaking, your poems are limited. What I want to say is that your themes move more or less between love and broken relations between man and woman.

Shahed Rahman (SR): Viewed from a layman's point of view cursorily, some of my poems may center around themes on love and broken relations. But if someone reads all my poems written from 1983 till date carefully, one will definitely discover that under the garb of love, my poems deal with different themes such as nature, homeland, politics, peace and other human issues. Judging my poems word by word, image by image, simile by simile will lead my readers to conclude that my poems, apart from being love poems, are living documents to realistic contemporary life. Expressions of individual experiences, dressed in romantic garb, my poems embody in themselves man's external craving for fulfillment of dreams on emotional and aesthetic fronts. Apart from that, my poems have their roots in actual experiences I have had myself. I project in them not only my love, but also my dream to have an ideal peaceful living for all mankind. Many of my poems dwell on political, social and economic themes. My images and similes are mostly drawn from happenings of today and yesterday. Oppression of man by man, oppression of citizens by state machinery, terrorism, political repression, love of nature and mankind, dream to have a peaceful global abode for all mankind, dream of having a just social order are also some important features of my poems. My first collection of poems, published in 1985, was entitled *Timire Prarthito Taraar Nupur* (A prayer for stars in darkness) bears testimony to my contention that my themes are essentially themes that move from day to night, frustration to hope, broken heart to harmony, fallen leaves to green leaves and so on.

DS: You have found your voice early in your poetic career which is no doubt a remarkable thing to achieve for any poet. Would you please tell us about the influences on you and also about the poet or poets who contributed most in shaping your poetic diction?

SR: It is difficult to identify the influences others exerted on me. To be an artist of the time one represents, to be an artist who wants to survive the onslaught of time, one must gather knowledge of his present and past, tradition, one must know as intensively as possible the works of masters of his time. Driven by my inner self to seek relief from an endless suffering following a shattered dream, I started writing poems back in 1982-83. As I did so, I discovered that it was essential to read the works of our great poets. I started reading the works of Jibanananda Das, Shamsur Rahman, Al-Mahmood, Buddhadev Basu, Shudindranath and Sunil Gangapaddya. You may agree with me that the language of love, whether it is that of Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Goethe, Shakespeare, Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, Shelley, Keats, T.S.Eliot, Shamsur Rahman, Al-Mahmood, is the same, the eternal language of love is the same, the difference being how it is spoken. I have on me the influences of Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, Shamsur Rahman, John Keats and, perhaps to some extent, T. S. Eliot but poetic creation, if you would allow me to call it so, is essentially mine. It is something fully independent by itself, retaining, however, some small fragments from the great poetic masters, not due to imitation, blind or conscious, but due to some force that happens naturally and spontaneously to any creative man who is a part of his time and surroundings. Thematically, I have crated a poetic atmosphere of my home, a small world that has its own peculiarities independent of others. It is my inner self that observes my external self, my own world and mind, emotion, dreams, protests. Happenings small or great, political or social, emotional or aesthetic, that move and stir myself deeply and enormously, only influence and inspire me to make a poem. But I would like to admit that I owe a great to John Keats for his melancholy, William Wordsworth for his love of nature, T. S. Eliot for his prophetic observation on the distress and helplessness of mankind as a whole. Matthew Arnold's craving for love to be true to each other and above all, Shakespeare and Rabindranath Tagore for their all-embracing appreciation of life as to "How beauteous mankind is," finds echoes in many of my poems.

So far as my poetic diction is concerned, I would also like not to admit whom I borrow from. It is essentially mine, although one may discover some influences of

Jibanananda Das, Shudindranath Dutta and Shamsur Rahman, which have occurred not because they have to, but because they have crept into spontaneously, the name of rose is always rose, I can't or for that matter anybody, name it otherwise.

DS: You started writing poetry in your early thirties which is a late beginning by any standard. Would you please explain, why?

SR: No one can predict when one will get involved in a creative work. During my days in the Dhaka University as a student of English literature, I hardly read any Bengali poem, nor did I ever think of writing one. I started writing poem back in 1981-82 against a background of intense mental agony. I could not control myself from being emotionally overwhelmed by a dream with some one who parted away from me, plunging me in a pool of frustration. As may be the case almost with every such emotion, my dream got broken, and only thing I had before me was an endless span of suffering. In quest of relief from that state of mind, I stated writing poem, an artistic pursuit that always gives me a sea of innocent joy. I dress my sorrow in poetic diction and that grants me a new lease of life every moment. I finish writing a new poem.

DS: For a late starter, eight books of poems in 20



years is a fantastic achievement and it also suggests that poetry comes to you as naturally as leaves to a tree and you don't have to labour for them.

SR: I don't agree to have achieved what you call a fantastic achievement but I would like to say that achievement for me of any kind is and will always continue to be something I have to work, strive and struggle for. Eight books of my poems got published since 1985 when my first collection *Timire Prarthito Taraar Nupur* was published in Chittagong. The years 2000 and 2001 have been quite productive; three books having come to light only in 2001. Eight books in 20 years, I won't agree with you, bear a testimony to my satisfaction so far creativity is concerned. Poetry is a spontaneous expression of feelings recollected in tranquillity, it is also a spontaneous expression of ideas and feelings gathering in one's inner-self like a storm that torments and moves oneself. For me it is like a storm that urges upon my looking out for an outlet of my feelings and sufferings. It comes to me like a rain that has to come, it may come today or tomorrow, or any time anywhere. It is an urge that moves me to think and express, an act of relief from an inferno, cooling my eyes with dew drops and filling my heart with innocent joy. I do agree with you that I never have to labour for an idea or feeling to transform into a poem.

DS: Tell us about your poetic process, that is, how different images and emotions mix to give birth to a poem.

SR: The first important thing for a poem is an urge or inspiration that grows from within and seeks to be relieved. That is an emotion. A poet first is stirred by an emotion, which may be an emotion of joy, or that of sorrow. He wants to express it artistically and as he does so, he looks forward to decorating his feeling with images or similes. Say, to express an act of betrayal by the lady you love, you may compare her act with anything that harms you from behind. Say, you want to compare her beauty, you do that with any thing you love to see, it may be the moon or a moonlit night or a flower. That is the artistic way that differentiates a poem from prose. Sometimes even an use of an adjective serves to create an image. My poems are, my readers may agree, abundantly rich with images, similes.

DS: The lyrical quality of your poetical work is a testimony to your passion for music. How does music inspire you to write poems?

SR: Any poem, perfect or otherwise, (I won't say good or bad) is a combination of several components like message, image, simile, emotion, conciseness, precision and melody. As you read or listen to a poem, the reader and or the person listening to it, must feel that he or she is listening to a song, finding a relief from mundane realities. As I write a poem I keep it in mind consciously that my readers must feel like moving into a stream unhindered and unobstructed first and secondly, they must feel that they care passing through a garden rich with flowers and birds' chirping. In order to create a musical world in my poems I try to add quality of music to whatever I try to transform into a poem.

DS: You are the President of 'Kabyakala', an organization for poets. What are your further plans with 'Kabyakala'?

SR: 'Kabyakala' is an association of poets most of whom started writing poems in 70s and 80s with an intention to earn for the poets a place of respect in the community. It wants to honour them with awards. It also wants to stand by them and the people in times of need. It upholds the principles of our great war of liberation and the principles the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, fought for. In future it would like to establish a link with overseas poets.

DS: Wit and satire is not usually found in Bangla poetry and they are not even considered a part of serious work. Your poems are a departure from that.

SR: No, I do not agree with you, it is not the case with all my major poems. Most of my poems deal with different aspects of life from an artistic point of view as life is lived with all its tears and rains, roses and thorns. There are a few satirical poems in my book entitled "Waiting for the Beauty to come" (---) where I have depicted an autocratic ruler of our country as the "Big Man" (*Barmia*) who puts his ugly hands on whatever is sublime and wherever he likes, be it a temple or the premise of the Tajmahal. There are some small elements of satire in a very few of my poems; these poems have added a different dimension to my poetic endeavour. In totality I don't agree that the main tone and atmosphere of my poems is satirical.

DS: Even though you are a romantic poet, contemporary issues of the society creep into your poems.

SR: The elements of romanticism are among others are melancholy, dreams for a utopia, decrying oppression, patriotism, love, love for nature patriotism, escapacism and so on. My poems are full of these elements with a difference. The basis of my poems, are drawn from my own experiences and my social surrounding. My poems hardly miss any contemporary social national pathetically and global happening, mationworthy. I combine dreams and realities together. They are bridge a dream and reality. I enjoy living, enjoy looking at lash green fields, flowers and trees, chirping butts and running clouds. The sky is an endless source of joy to me. I am not an escapist, though I cry for award free from agonies and oppression, a drink that is almost a utopia to achieve.

DS: The year 2001 has been so far an productive year for your poetic career. Your last three books have been published in February last. When is your next book due?

SR: I think towards end this year I may get another book of my published. I intend to bring out an English translation of some of my poems if I get a publisher this year.

DS: Thank you very much for your time.

TRIBUTE

A Gentle Enchantment

DOM MORAES ON RK NARAYAN

I HEARD with sorrow of Narayan's death. He had of course become very old, and in recent years said that age had made him irascible, and that he no longer wanted to meet people. But he was a marvellous man. When I first met him I was about 15, so he must still have been in his 40s. He then lived in Mysore. I had not yet published a book but some of my poetry had appeared in Indian magazines.

I don't know why he agreed to meet me, a speechless adolescent. It was an honour for me because even as a boy I admired



him. But he didn't conform to my image of a writer. He said that he never left Mysore because he couldn't get a decent cup of coffee anywhere else. He also advised me not to write poetry because it made even less money than novels. Nearly 50 years later, he still remembered having made this remark. "Why should one go through such an elaborate form of torture," he said, about writing, "if one isn't properly paid for it?"

In 1980 the Karnataka government asked Mario Miranda and me to do a book about the state. At the same time it asked Narayan and his also greatly gifted brother R.K.Laxman to do a similar book. The government didn't tell us about them or them about us. We bumped into them by accident in Bangalore. We were all pleasantly surprised till we realised that we were all busy at the same task. Then Narayan said, "We shouldn't mind if the government feels that it can't have enough of a good thing."

He had tremendous charm, as did his work. Charm is not supposed to be a good quality in a writer. But Narayan's charm wasn't what the media mean by that word. It was a gentle enchantment exercised by his personality and his books on all those who came in contact with them. Many successful Indian novelists "arrived" while he was still alive. His attitude suggested that he rather despised them. Who if not he had the right to do so? He lived a rather secluded life, and seldom appeared at literary parties. No prizes came his way. He never received astronomical advances. But he led a richer life than most of his successors, and he was by far the best writer of English fiction that this country has ever produced. His work made foreign readers, as well as some in India, understand how it feels like to be Indian, and what life in India is like.

The last time I saw him was in 1997. He had by then come to live in Chennai for reasons of health. When talking about his move, he said frivolously that if given the choice he would have liked to live his life in London or New York. Another writer, Sarayu Ahuja, was also present. She inquired, "But if you'd lived there, how would you have created Malgudi?" Narayan replied, "If I'd lived there I would have had more sense than to be a writer. I would have been a businessman, a stockbroker, so that everything I did made money."

Courtesy: tehelka.com

Readings of RK Narayan

PANKAJ MISHRA ON NARAYAN'S WRITING ON HIS OWN WORK AND ON INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

I ACTUALLY came to Narayan quite late in my writing career. I had read a few of his novels in my early and mid 20's. But this was a time when I really couldn't think about writing or literature in any serious or interesting way. I read the books as 'entertainments'; and judged them as such. Narayan has been generally condescended to by people who think that Indian writing really got into stride in 1981 with Midnight's Children, and although I didn't share that prejudice I was influenced enough by it to not ever undertake a systematic reading of his novels.

With his curiously English inspirations, Narayan seemed to belong to a superannuated colonial world, especially at a time when we were being assured that a confident new post-colonial era in Indian writing had commenced, in which we were all going to write/strike back at the empire. From this stirring onslaught, in which the Scud Missiles of convent Hinglish were being fired at the empire, Narayan, with his classically restrained style, seemed deliberately absent.

Then, last year, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra asked me to write an essay on Narayan for his History of Indian literature in English. I hesitated. But I am glad I said yes. The three months I spent reading and rereading Narayan's writings retain a nice glow in my memory; Malgudi has joined those places in my mind that I can always conjure up and then lazily wander around in. The corpus did strike me as uneven. As a travel and essay writer, Narayan wasn't very impressive; nor was he an original or fresh thinker. The fiction can also disappoint. I remember struggling through A Tiger for Malgudi and some of the stories. You could even say that the novels have terrific beginnings but often peter out much

before the end. But there are good reasons for this. Malgudi, with its colonial infrastructure and vibrant street life, may seem like an amusingly quaint place. But the people living in it are trapped by its smallness. They have been expelled from their old rural worlds and they have nowhere to go. In Malgudi, they pursue promises of personal and social advancement that colonial modernity has held out to them. But the promises turn out to be fraudulent. It is these small derelictions and tragedies that Narayan wrote about, without any heavyhandedness, but with an almost miraculous humour and irony.

This had a special resonance for me for when I read through his work I had just published my first publishable novel, and what I now discovered was that all the things I was trying to explore---

young men in small towns, their vague longings created by a semi-colonial education, their various frustrations---economic, sexual, cultural---all this Narayan had written about. So I had a precursor I could look up to, and learn from, and I can't overestimate the importance of this to a young writer working in a young tradition that still doesn't seem very coherent. It is equally hard to overestimate Narayan's role in inaugurating this tradition in the mid 1930s with *Swami and Friends*---a time when there were hardly any publishers or readers for Indian writing in English.

Even much later, there was no historical or cultural moment that his work could link itself with, unlike present-day Indian writing in English whose international prominence would have been inconceivable without globalization, and the politics of post-colonial theory.

Courtesy: tehelka.com

BOOK REVIEW

Displaced and disregarded

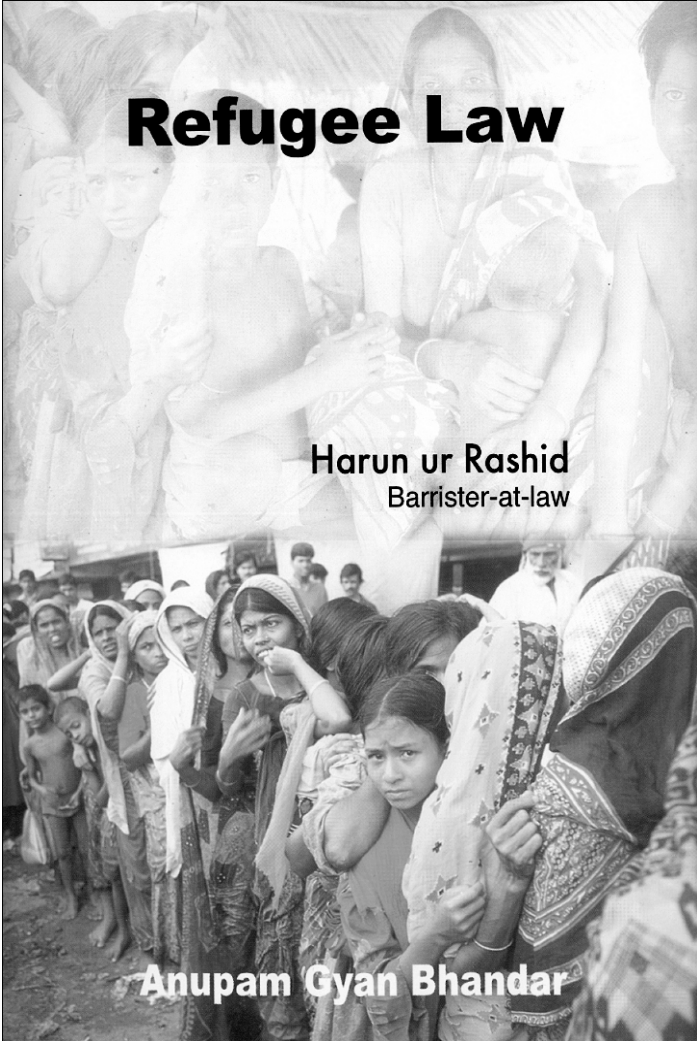
EKRAM KABIR

REFUGEE LAW  
By Harun ur Rashid  
Published by Anupam Gyan Bhandar  
Taka 280; Pages: 211

WHY do people leave homes? Why do people seek refuge in another country? Questions like these have kept policy-makers busy charting guidelines for displaced persons since the beginning of civilisation. There has always been refugees and displaced people, but it's the twentieth century that has given rise the highest number of refugees all over the world. But who is a refugee, anyway? Traditionally, any person who has been forced to flee his or her home for fear of life or lack of subsistence is regarded a refugee. However, in international law only those who are denied protection of their home states and as a result have crossed international borders to seek refuge in another country are accepted as refugees. This is one of the basic issues Harun ur Rashid, the writer of "Refugee Law" has dealt in his book. The writer, a former diplomat, now residing in Australia, meticulously tried to draw a line between who can be and cannot be a refugee.

Faced with the problem of a large number of displaced and uprooted persons after the First World War, the western nations created international instruments for the protection, return as well as resettlement of persons, called refugees, in other countries. The Nansen Passport was created to provide these stateless persons with a temporary identity. Between 1922 and 1926 under the auspices of the League of Nations, several treaties created certain obligations on the contracting states, making it necessary to define the term "refugee". The League of Nations treaties initially defined the "refugees" as a category or group of persons who were, a) outside their country of origin and b) without the protection of the government of their home state. Later in 1938 the definition was restricted to only such persons who had left their countries of origin for fear of persecution. The 1938 instrument excluded those who had left their homeland for "purely personal reasons". It was decided to exclude victims of natural disasters, as they were not forcibly expelled by the governments of their home states.

Then, the Second World War generated about 45 million refugees, most of whom were in Europe. It was then the International Refugee Organisation (IRO)



was created to seek an early return of the refugees and the displaced persons to their countries of origin. The United Nations took up the task of rehabilitation of the refugees in a serious manner. In 1950 the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Refugees was created by the UN General Assembly which replaced the IRO. In 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted. The UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted by the General Assembly in 1967.

By sincerely elaborating all these international conventions and treaties - meant for protecting and rehabilitating the displaced people - Rashid cites some examples from war-torn countries that have produced a huge number of refugees all over the world. In "Refugee Law", he mentions about some recent wars as to how they became instrumental to generate refugees. In doing so, the writer highlights some South Asian cases. South Asia has the fourth largest concentration of refugees in the world. A majority of displaced persons who have crossed international borders in this region are not regarded as "refugees" by the host governments.

The communal violence that followed the partition of the Indian subcontinent in the wake of inde-

pendence of India and Pakistan in 1947 displaced about 15 million people. Then again, about 500,000 persons of Indian origin who had lived in Burma for generations were uprooted by the programme of Burmanisation after Burma's independence in 1948. Sri Lanka after becoming independent created approximately 900,000 stateless persons by refusing to grant them citizenship. The liberation war of Bangladesh in 1970-71 had sent about 10 million refugees to India. Most of them came back to Bangladesh after the country's liberation. However, the liberation of Bangladesh has left a huge number if "stranded Pakistanis" in Dhaka. In 1989, nearly 96,000 Bhutanese of Nepali ethnic origin from southern Bhutan took refuge in Nepal.

Most of the time, these people were - and are - usually treated as "undesirable aliens" or "illegal immigrants". The governments in this region have also not signed or ratified the 1951 UN Convention Concerning the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the only available UN mechanism for the protection and rehabilitation of refugees.

The post-colonial states in South Asia were born out of displacement and expulsion of a large number of people and the state system, as it stands today in the region, is

perched precariously on the creation of minorities, stateless population, and the continuing exodus of victims of various condition. There are no national laws which define and regulate the status of refugees in the countries of South Asia. In most countries in the region, the powers to grant "residential permits" have been relegated to administrators at district and sub district levels. They grant and revoke these certificates at their discretion. The refugees have no legal protection against summary expulsions as they are treated as illegal immigrants and not as refugees fleeing persecution. The UNHCR has tried many ways, but not been able to provide effective and meaningful protection to most refugees in war-torn regions of the world. Even international humanitarian agencies are often failing to influence governments in meaningful ways while protecting displaced persons.

Rashid shows how the existing definitions of refugees, displaced persons and migrants are rather narrow and uni-dimensional. The definitions of the past need to be reviewed and reformulated in order to accommodate the existing reality. New and effective international instruments and national laws need to be created to protect the rights of these hapless millions who may not have any legal exis-

tence in most countries of the world today. To redress problems related to refugees and displaced persons, governments need to develop a strong legal and institutional framework. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, submitted to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998, provide a sound ethical and pragmatic foundation for such a framework for IDPs. The governments should also strengthen their institutional capacity to assist IDPs by enhancing communication between vulnerable populations their states. Future wars and internal conflict are likely to produce more IDPs than official refugees. The growing international concern for the world's internally displaced persons is encouraging. The challenge now lies in developing legal and institutional frameworks to address their plight and in getting governments to formulate policies to protect the rights and welfare of their displaced citizens. Harun ur Rashid, in his "Refugee Law" has tried to provide some guidelines which would certainly help those who are actively dealing with the issue.