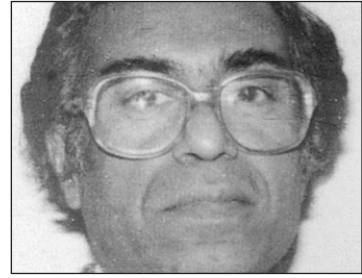


INTERVIEW

Ghulam Murshid: The Man who Rediscovered Madhusudan



Ghulam Murshid

For many natives living in the 19th century Michael Madhusudan Datta was full of foppish 'Daat'. For many Englishmen of that time Madhusudan Dutt was nothing but 'Dirt'. And for Prof. Ghulam Murshid, Madhusudan 'Datta' is a 'gifted' person with colourful personality, a versatile genius, and a social reformer in his own capacity.

The Daily Star (DS): You are a student of Bangla literature, but you are more tilted towards history. I wonder why!

Ghulam Murshid (GM): I guess, my attachment with Prof. David Kopf while working on the Brama Samaj of Bengal generated my interest in history. But even before I met Prof. Kopf, I edited a book on Vidyasagar, which exposed me to a wide array of writers including Michael Madhusudan Datta. I became interested in the 19th century literary circle.

DS: The luminous figures of the Bengali renaissance. GM: Well, we need to be cautious before applying the term 'renaissance'. What we mean by renaissance in Europe in the late 14th and the 15th centuries is not what we see in Bengal. That is only a little bit of it.

DS: Is 'Bengali renaissance' then a borrowed idea from the west?

GM: It sure is. Renaissance changed our outlook to life. Rammohun, Akhaykumar, Vidyasagar, Madhusudan were reformists and revivalists. But can we think of a Bankim without western influence? The influence of west worked in a myriad of ways.

DS: Like the switch from Latin to vernacular languages like English.

GM: Right DS: Tell me, why Madhusudan? GM: It's accidental. I had some interest in Michael Madhusudan. But I took real interest in this man during a visit of Prof. Shibnarayan Roy.

I took my cue from this comment and went to the India Office in London where I found some information about Michael's marriage and children that I had not read in any of the books. I started frequenting the libraries for eight years. Some days were more rewarding than others. I was looking at things like ship passenger's list, church attendance, letters, paper cuttings, bills, vouchers and the like.

DS: It's like solving a jigsaw puzzle?

GM: I wish I could get the whole picture. For example, I really don't know why Michael and Rebecca broke up.

DS: Or, as you mentioned, why Michael left London for Versailles? GM: Yes, maybe someone else will find evidence and enlighten us. But the chances are slim.

DS: Now tell me, which Madhusudan appealed to you the most: the man, the father, the husband, or the poet? GM: The genius. He was an eccentric man with genuine love for scholarship: language and literature.

DS: He was a caring father. He was torn between love for Rebecca and Henrietta. Extreme love can have

extreme consequences.

DS: Do you think Madhusudan was a colonial agent? Was he an Ariel or a Caliban?

GM: He was the product of colonialism, but he was a not a colonial agent. He criticised the then Company government in different editorials and articles.

DS: Isn't that a colonial agenda? That was exactly the way the Old World justified their presence across the board, especially in the New World.

GM: The Company probably learnt its lesson from the European experience in the New World. The Company never allowed missionaries to meddle in their affairs. Only the Anglican Church was allowed to come to India just for the Company's purpose.

DS: In your book you maintained that Michael would have been a better writer had he had better criticism of his works.

GM: Only his colleague from Hindu College Raj Narayan Bose could offer some criticism. With more constructive criticism, we would have had a better writer.

DS: How about JED Bathoon who discouraged Michael's writings in English?

GM: In retrospective, he proved right. It was Michael's pretension that he did not know Bengali.

DS: What about criticism to your own work when it was being published in Desh?

GM: I received some comments from people like Sagarmoy Ghosh, Ahmed Sharif, Rabindra Kumar Ds Gupta, Madan Lal Byas. But my friend in Oxford, Jayanta Kumar Saha was my greatest critic.

DS: Is it true that you once supported Devabrata's experiment with Tagore's song?

GM: Devabrata Biswas gave a new interpretation of Tagore's songs not to the liking of the Biswabharati. Maybe he wasn't correct.

DS: And Michael did the same thing. He tried to understand Tagore and express it in his own ways.

GM: (laugh) DS: Do you think that we are a history-conscious people?

GM: We never were. Ashoka had to be discovered by an Englishman, James Prinsep in 1834. Because, Indians forgot about Ashoka's writing ranging from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari in different stupas.

Bankim was a history conscious person. But he consciously belittled the Muslims. The same is with Ramesh Majumder. After the creation of Pakistan and later Bangladesh, we have glorified the Muslim rules at the expense of the Hindus.

Even after 30 years of independence, we are giving a distorted account of the liberation war. Those who believe in Bengali nationalism highlight Mujib's contribution, but they hardly talk about the Pakistani mistakes that also contributed to the making of Bangladesh.

DS: That brings me to my last question, is it possible to remain objective while telling history?

GM: You can consciously try to give a dispassionate view. True, a writer is going to have his or her own opinion. But s/he must present it in a 'dispassionate' way. We need to remember the Bengali speaking population in both Bengals is equally divided in religious lines.

DS: Thank you. GM: It has been my pleasure.



শ্যাম বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়  
আশার ছলনে ভুলি



The eternal resting place of Michael Madhusudan Datta

FICTION

The Target

NAYAN RAHMAN

THE incident involved Zainab. Zainab is a young girl. She roams around Munshiji's house with her mother. Occasionally she runs errands for her mother.

However, none would say after seeing Zainab that she was stony. Her face is round and sweet. The simple looks of the 12-year-old girl appear to radiate grace like clusters of moonlight.

Moved by the moonlight, would they go to the bank of the river flowing gently forward after crossing the fields and forests? The river lay in the lap of the village like a plate of silver.

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Even the silent road of the district board appeared to wake up due to the sound of the dancing children. Zainab was repeatedly stumbling because of her short and tight saree.

Zainab cried out frantically, 'No-o-o-o'. But the cries of Zainab could only marginally dent the wall of the white moonlight. Zainab got bruised by the paw of the black vulture or tomcat or demon.

When the children of God were returning through that road walking hand in hand and singing in a chorus, they found an unconscious Zainab lying in the middle of the path.

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faraway destination. Then the distant bushes and forests appeared to be rushing forward to swallow them.

Then, one of the boys raced home piercing through the wind and the delicate cover of moonlight with the speed of a deer.

The elders were upset by the description. They shuddered repeatedly and spat on their chests. They recited prayers and lastly expressed the opinion that it was the work of a 'jin'.

Usually, the naughty demons and fairies crush the hands and feet if their desire is not quenched. Sometimes they even kill. Then they all shouted at Zainab's mother, 'Ah woman, why are you walling? Thank Allah that you got your child back.'

However hard she tries, Zainab can not relate the events before she lost consciousness with those afterwards. But despite wanting to, Zainab cannot claim that the mighty 'jin' has four hands and feet.

Allah, thinking that the tough blessings and amulets of the Moulavi saheb have yielded result. But the night of full moon recedes. The shadow lengthens in the courtyard.

But finally, crossing that barrier, the 'jin' of full moon dives in like a fiend on the new moon's night. It plunders Zainab once again. The cries of Zainab do not reach her sleeping mother's ears.

Again, the Moulavi Saheb comes along. He gives amulet and blessing. He adds to this the advice of burning any part of Zainab's body with red-hot forceps.

the veil of darkness surrounding the new moon. Pressurised, requested and directed by all, Zainab sits with the hot forceps in her hand. But she cannot draw the courage to touch her body with it.

Moulavi saheb says, 'Ma, don't lose courage; you will touch the hot forceps with your own hand after closing your eyes; press it on your forehead or chest or wherever you wish; you will imagine that you are burning the devil.'

Translated by Helal Uddin Ahmed, the Editor of Bangladesh Quarterly, Department of Films and Publications.

POETRY

MAHBUB KABIR EARTH

Wow the earth is still a teen  
Let's deep dive.  
Let's row my fancy wayward  
On these thriving whistling waves.

KITE

My wings smell boy's desire.  
How up is the dome?  
Boy's desire do I fly  
Music of the around sphere,

MY FLESH

I slung down the bird off tree.  
I skinned the bird to chop into flesh.  
Now I am boiling my flesh myself  
I taste good and warm.

THE DARKNESS MAN

Before our very eyes  
The darkness man  
Devoured a full long milk white snake.  
Bewildered  
We saw  
Hundreds of us  
Crowding him  
On the platform.

Translated by Mashrur Shahid Hossain

in history

THIS WEEK

August 24

- 1847: Charlotte Brontë dispatches Jane Eyre to the publishing house of Smith, Elder & Co. under the pseudonym of Currer Bell. Visit the Brontë Society homepage and Brontë Country.
- 1899: Jorge Luis Borges (Ficciones) is born in Buenos Aires.
- 1922: Virginia Woolf writes Lytton Strachey after reading the first six chapters of James Joyce's Ulysses: "Never have I read such tosh.... Of course, genius may blaze out on page 652 but I have my doubts."

August 25

- 1776: Scottish philosopher (Treatise of Human Nature) and historian (History of England) David Hume dies in Edinburgh at the age of 65.
- 1838: The ever-curious Ralph Waldo Emerson seeks out Thomas Carlyle in Cumberland, gets himself invited to dinner, and initiates a lifelong friendship.
- 1860: In Sonderup, Denmark, playwright, poet, literary critic Johan Heiberg dies. The influential literary paper he edited in Copenhagen from 1827 to 1830 introduced many new writers, including Soren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen.
- 1900: After a long mental illness, Friedrich Nietzsche, German philosopher (Thus Spake Zarathustra), dies in the care of his sister, whose efforts to keep his work published toward the end of the philosopher's life brought him renewed recognition.
- 1907: Mary Coleridge, poet, dies.

August 26

- 1874: American novelist and playwright, Zona Gale, is born in Portage, Wisconsin. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning Miss Lulu Brett, a study of an unmarried woman's attempts at self-assertion in the face of a constricting social environment, will establish her as a realistic chronicler of Midwestern village life.
- 1880: French man of letters Guillaume Apollinaire, is born in Rome of Polish parents.
- 1914: Argentine novelist and short-story writer, Julio Cortázar, is born in Brussels, Belgium. Educated in Argentina, his first collection of short-stories, Bestiario, will be published the year he moves to Paris, 1951, where he will live the rest of his life.

August 27

- 1660: Because of John Milton's attacks on King Charles II, books written by the poet are burned in London.
- 1770: Born today at No. 53 Eberhardstrasse in Stuttgart, German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.
- 1938: Ajealous Robert Frost disrupts a poetry reading by Archibald MacLeish by setting fire to a stack of papers.
- 1950: Italian poet, critic, novelist, Cesare Pavese, dies, a suicide, in Turin. He will tell his biographer, Davide Lajolo, "Mine would be a biography to be written with a scalpel. I am made up of too many parts that do not blend." The Pavese Prize for literature was established in 1957 in his honor.

August 28

- 430: Best known for his work Confessiones (The Confessions) and De civitate Dei (The City of God), Saint Augustine dies in Hippo Regius.
- 1749: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is born in Frankfurt-am-Main: "From my father, I inherited my stature and the serious conduct of my life from my dear mother, my gaiety of spirit and delight in story-telling."
- 1828: According to the Russian calendar in use at this time, today is the day Leo Tolstoy is born.
- 1924: Leading New Zealand writer of novels, short fiction, and poetry, Janet Frame, is born in Dunedin.
- 1952: African-American writer, teacher, and poet laureate, Rita Dove, is born in Akron, Ohio.

August 29

- 1579: John Fletcher dies in London. He worked collectively on more than 50 plays; among his own, The Wild-Goose Chase, a play noted for its irony and easy wit, is probably the best.
- 1854: Australian-born English folklore scholar and one of the most popular 19th-century adapters of children's fairy tales, Joseph Jacobs is born in Sydney.
- 1862: In Ghent, Belgium, Maurice Maeterlinck, poet and playwright, is born. Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911, his work represents an outstanding example of Symbolist poetry and theater.
- 1929: Anglo-American poet, Thom Gunn, known for his adroit, terse verse, is born in Gravesend, Kent.

August 30

- 1797: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin author of Frankenstein, is born in London, the daughter of radical philosopher William Godwin and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft.

Source: Internet