LITERATURE

INTERVIEW

Ghulam Murshid: The Man who Rediscovered Madhusudan



The Daily Star, Prof Murshid tells how it all began: his passion for writing a 'dispassionate' account fo Madhusudan.

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

Ghulam Murshid (GM): I guess, my attachment with Prof. David Kopf while working on the Bhrama Samai of Bengal generated my interest in history. But even before I met Prof. Kopf. I edited a book on Vidvasagar, 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 renaissanc.

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. There were some attempts to use the puranas (myths) or the old shashtras and give them new interpretations. Raja Rammohon Roy started it, Vidyasagar followed it, and Michael Madhusudan applied in his works. But that is only one aspect of European renaissance: modernising and humanising religion where the focus shifts from God to man. But it didn't permeate into the whole society like Italian renaissance did in the realm of economics, art, architecture, and religion. We don't see any such thing in the 19th century Bengal.

DS: Is 'Bengali renaissance' then a borrowed idea from

GM: It sure is. Renaissance changed our outlook to life. Rammohon, 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. There were attempts to explain 'Hinduism' from a scientific way. Say for instance, the use of copper utensils in different customs is justified because copper is supposed to kill germs. A feeble attempt to find an explanation of religion. In fact, as Bankim has shown, the real renaissance in Bengal took place during the time of Chaitanyadeva. His thoughts stirred only a small part of the Hindus, but the creative expression that followed is unprecedented. People started writing in Bengali instead of Sanskrit.

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. He was staying with me in London on his way back from Oxford where he had read William Radice's doctoral dissertation on Madhusudan. He casually expressed his dissatisfaction, saying, "[Radice] has given an interpretation of Michael Madhusudan's work, but a biography would have been more significant.

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. Not everything was there at the India Office. For example, there was no information on Michael's second wife Henrietta simply because they never got married. But when I went to Versaille, where two of Michael's children were born, I discovered Henritta's surname, which led me to new information. I also gathered lot of information from Rhodes House in Oxford from the records of Society for the Propagation of Gospels (SPG) and also from the Bishop's College. Similarly, from James Long's paper in Birmingham I came to about Michael's first wife Rebecca's father's name, Robert Thompson. That helped me reconstruct the life of a virtually unknown Madhusudan. Most of the earlier biographers of Madhusudan used hearsay accounts. But I worked on historical evidences and put them together.

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

GM: Yes, maybe someone else will find evidence and enlighten us. But the chances are slim. Because I exhausted almost all sources expecting the High Court in Calcutta, where Michael worked for the latter part of his career. I received very little cooperation when I was researching at the High Court. Also, they have a poor storing/documenting facility. It would be really difficult to find new information that might change our impression about Michael.

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. He had a great passion for life. Even in abject poverty, he kept on reading and writing. As a man, he was colourful, to say the least. He was prolific as a poet. As a husband, it saddens me the way he deserted Rebecca and the children. But he never lost his love for Rebecca and his children. He was a caring father. He was torn between love for Rebecca and Henrietta. Extreme love can have

extreme consequences.

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. Prof Murshid (b. 1940) has been living in London since 1984.

He did his MA from Dhaka University and then his PhD under famous historian David Kopf. Prof. Murshid taught at Rajshahi

University for nearly two decades before settling in London where he is involved with radio journalism at BBC and teaching at SOAS.

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. He had his love for European civilization and also his hatred for the European ruling class. He probably romanticised Europe and thought that Christianity as a salvaging force that would revitalise the once-rich Indian civiliza-

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. And even that was not allowed to preach Christianity. Only the latter Baptist Churches, Scottish Churches and SPG preached for conversion during the end of the 18th century.

But let me go back to your earlier question. I think Michael confused Christianity and the western civilization. He converted to Christianity because he saw the

'progress' in western civilization through literature alone দীড়াও, পথিক-বর, জল যদি ডব विताप) प्रशित श्रम प्रशा निपात्र मंद्र करताहर कवि श्रीयश नमनः

राङ नातागत नाटम, इननी ३१७थी।

ঘাইকেল মধ সদন দত। The eternal resting place of Michael Madhusudan Datta

DS: In your book you maintained that Michael would have been a better writer had he had better criticism of his works. What really is the function of criticism for creative works?

GM: Only his colleague from Hindu College Rai Naravan 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. He proved himself wrong, didn't he?

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. He read my chapters and challenged me to excel with his harsh criticism. But I am sad that there hasn't been any decent review of my book so far, albeit the second edition is also running out of stock.

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 Biswabaharati. Maybe he wasn't correct. But he tried to understand Tagore and express it in his own ways.

DS: And Michael did the same thing. He tried to understand the Hindu puranas in his own way. Somehow you have support for people who break norms.

DS: Do you think that we are a history-conscious peo-

GM: We never were. Ashoka had to be discovered by an Englishman, James Prinsy in 1834. Because, Indians forgot about Ashoka's writing ranging from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari in different stupas. There is hardly any dispassionate historical account of Bengal. We have some accounts of Muslim invaders and travelogues by globetrotters

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. Bengali Muslims never were secular. In the 1960s there were some attempts, but we never managed to transcend our communal/religious identity. Today, when BNP talks about the declaration of the liberation war by Zia, they forget how insignificant that is compared to what was going on.

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. To record a history of Bengal we must go beyond this religious frame of mind and strive for a secular account

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

He spent eight years in writing the first commendable biography of Michael Madhusudan Datta, Ashar Chhalaney Bhuli, that was first published as serials in Desh and later as a book by Ananda Prakashani, Calcutta (1995). On his recent visit to Dhaka, he gave a lecture series in Jahangirnagar University and a seminar at Bangla Academy. In an interview to Shamsad Mortuza, the page editor of আশার ছলনে ভলি

Then whose warm blood did flood my cheek! Thunder-- it's wax, Helpless wings are dripping down Threadless kite's rushing downto another boyto Icarus.

POETRY

MAHBUB KABIR **EARTH**

Let's deep dive.

I don't forget.

I love to meet.

A virgin teen forever

I'll play earth now.

KITE

Wow the earth is still a teer

Let's row my fancy wayward

Once an earth just like this

Everyday a tender new earth

I believe past is not old hag; Everyday a teen past is, everyday a wedding day, everyday a brushing teeth

My wings smell boy's desire.

Music of the around sphere

How up is the dome?

Boy's desire do I fly

beneath false city!

On these thriving whistling waves On my chasing of Bison and Mamr

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 MA 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. Black is the night Deep sleeps dark. Stars are crowding the sky eyes wide stunned The darkness man Is slowly devouring

Translated by Mashrur Shahid Hossain

A huge white star.

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 Bonderup, 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.

August 26

1907: Mary Coleridge, poet, dies.

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 selfassertion 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: A jealous 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

1828: According to the Russian calendar in use at this time, today is the day Leo Tolstoy is

1924:Leading New Zealand writer of novels, short fiction, and poetry, Janet Frame, is born in

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

1929: Anglo-American poet, Thom Gunn, known for his adroit, terse verse, is born in Graves-

August 30

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

The Target NAYAN RAHMAN HE incident involved Zainab. Zainab is a young girl. She roams around Munshiji's

house with her mother. Occasionally she runs errands for her mother. While passing her days like this, one day she picks up the rice tray. Then she starts pressing the rice thresher with her tender feet while swinging in the air. At first Munshiii's mother Arifa Begum shouts, 'What are you doing lassie, your feet would be broken, you will be hurt'. But she soon stops chiding her. The physigue of a girl coming from a poor working class family hardens in this

FICTION

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. Although much of Zainab's time are spent under the shadow of her mother in the kitchen and the rice crushing room, she occasionally joins children of similar age in Munshi's dwelling complex-for games and fun. She joined them on that day also. It was a night of full moon in autumn. The gardens, ponds and fields were all flooded with the white rays of moon. Children from all the eight houses of the complex were in the courtyard for celebration. Zainab was also with them. They were all laughing and singing. Around a dozen children from the bunch walked quite a long distance while dancing and singing, leaving behind the cowshed, the pond and the school building.

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. The elevated road of the district board stretches a long way touching the bosom of that river.

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. To cover up her lost grounds, she raised her saree over her knee and tried to rush through the air like a bird. At that very moment, she stooped over a large lump of clay and fell. Then the dark shadow of a vulture devoured the colourful 12vear self of Zainab on that moonlit road of the district board.

Zainab cried out frantically. 'No-oo-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. Her resistance of small fists petered away like a wall of sand. That tomcat or demon rolled over to the paddy field while clasping Zainab playfully. Zainab did not lose her consciousness till then. Even at that point, the melody of the children's songs was floating to her ear like the sound of a distant flute. It seemed to her as if her hands and feet were being crushed under the weight of a huge piece of rock. Zainab could conjecture that the group she belonged to had gone far away by then, singing the song of

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. Zainab's dishevelled hair was spread all over her face. The saree that she was wearing was raised much above her ankle. Only the bare body of Zainab was covered by a single twist of saree. It looked as if the clusters of moonlight were keeping Zainab asleep. Seeing Zainab lying in that condition, the children of the group cried out in horror. The birds of music escaped from them flapping their wings for a faraway destination. Then the distant bushes and forests appeared to be rushing forward to swallow them. The rippling sound of the river water seemed to be gushing with great gusto for drowning them. They continued to cry out loudly. Their voice became broken because of the shouts. Blood poured into their throats. Some of them collapsed beside Zainab like broken leaves. As if their blood cells suddenly withered after coming into contact with an evil wind.

Then, one of the boys raced home piercing through the wind and the delicate cover of moonlight with the speed of a deer. At last somebody lifted Zainab with his hand and then carried her home. Those in the group who were fully exhausted assembled in the courtyard of the dwelling complex, hand in hand, chest against chest, breathing very deeply. After getting back their breath, they started to narrate in a chorus the tale of a miraculous shadow. Or was it an animal or some other evil force, which carried Zainab away from the group?

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'. Zainab is a beautiful virgin. After seeing Zainab, a naughty 'jin' came down to earth from the sky in order to kidnap her. These demons and fairies actually come down during the full moon. People started to narrate their strange experiences one after another. Naughty demons and fairies are the enemies of God. Zainab was lucky that she was not carried on their wings to an unknown place. That unknown place could be the palm tree beside the river. The demons and fairies take refuge in these big trees. They are attracted to beautiful girls.

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 wailing? Thank Allah that you got your child back. Another person said, "Come on brother, this is not called getting back: It is called, showing the fox the box of the chicken; go and bring the Moulavi saheb (priest) from the mosque; give her sugar and oil; give her blessed water; your daughter has been touched once: see what happens to her if you do not give her an amulet." Zainab remains the talk of the whole village for many days to come. Even people from far-flung areas come to see Zainab after hearing that she has been possessed by the 'jin'. Advice keeps on pouring. A flood of oil flow on her head, flood of oil blessed by the Moulavi saheb. Her neck becomes heavy with the amulets tied with black thread. Even inside Zainab's mind, the notion of a 'jin' gets firmly

Usually, the naughty demons and

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, a hairy chest and a hot breath of fire, which seemed to emerge from a furnace. Finally, after listening to repeated clarifications about the workings of the jin, Zainab tends to believe that it was really a 'jin' who wanted to shatter her body, press her face and make her blind. Zainab gets back her physical fitness after the lapse of one week. She again ties her hair carefully and rubs her face with oil. She looks at her face in the mirror, goes to the pond to fetch water and helps her mother in cooking. But she never goes to the courtyard even by mistake and does not walk alone.

Zainab's mother expresses gratitude to

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. The darkness of the garden takes shelter in the house. The sky becomes gloomy and the light from the twinkling stars finds it difficult to reach the earth after travelling such a long distance. Zainab remains huddled near the lap of her mother. The comer of the rice-crushing room at Munshiji's dwelling was a safe refuge for the mother and the daughter. But finally, crossing that barrier. the 'iin' 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. Even the cat which lies near her head and occasionally below her feet does not get any inkling of the happenings around. The unconscious body of Zainab lies outside the rice-crushing room throughout the night. Clusters of darkness harden and crystallise A dense tar-like darkness surrounds Zainab and her indignity all through the night. Again, there is a cry of anguish. Her mother's lamentations can again be heard. Stories circulate once again. It is now a ghost, not a 'jin'. It is now the story of a monster or fiend. The ghosts and vampires, monsters and fiends visit during the night of new moon. They want to seize beautiful girls. They want to suck their blood. Zainab looks with fearful eyes even during daytime. Her body trembles in terror. What horrid pictures appear

inside her head! Zainab sits still like a solid rock 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. Zainab herself would have to do it for her own wellbeing. The fiend was very naughty,

or was it a monster? It came under

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, mama, you won't feel any pain; won't get hurt. Only the devil who possessed you would be burnt and hurt. Everybody encourages Zainab. Gradually Zainab feels emboldened. All the people in the dwelling complex have gathered in the courtvard by then. The lamp was alight. Darkness was gone due to the light of the lamp. Zainab sees rows of people. Everybody was looking at her very intensely. Zainab could see that tears were rolling down like torrents from her poor mother's eyes. A faint smile passed through Zainab's face. Everybody else smiled back in response. They appeared to reassure her. Moulavi saheb says, "Ma, don't

the veil of darkness surrounding the

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." Now only a few more moments are left. The sweet words of Moulavi saheb have not yet subsided. Zainab stands up. Her face is glowing in the light of the lamp. Seeing her stand up, everybody encourages, "Press it, girlie, press right now." Zainab has ignited the forceps by holding it in the fire. Now the forceps is burning like a red sun. Zainab closes her eyes. Then then she plunges the red-hot forceps on the chest of Munshiji's son,

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