

BOOK REVIEW

Three Palatable Books

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Rabi and Ray: The Mind and its Eye

Shatyajit Rabindranath Anwar Hossain Pintu (Edited) Shatyajit Research Centre Chittagong February 2002. 431 pages, Tk. 500 ISBN 984-776-0061-0

WHEN a seven-year-old Satyajit approached Rabindranath for an autograph in his newly bought notebook, an uncharacteristic Tagore, reputed for writing verse 'then and there,' kept it for a day and asked his favourite 'Shukumar's son' to come the next day. The notebook was returned with the now-famous lines written on it:

"... Haven't opened my eyes,
Taking just two strides
Out of my house
Just to see the dew that lies
On the blade of a rice."
[Translation mine]

Something in Tagore told him that Satyajit was a special boy. No wonder, years later, when he grew up into his teen, Tagore simply asked him to come over to his 'abode of peace.' Satyajit, not really interested in leaving Calcutta, half-heartedly obliged. It is at Shantiniketan where Shatyajit found some 'untrodden' old books on films, personally collected by Tagore, which sparked his interest in films, and eventually created a celebrity out of him.

Rabi and Ray shine in their own capacity only to illuminate Bengali culture. Still, the meeting of these two great personalities is a momentous occasion, especially for our literary history. With a thinking eye, Satyajit Ray has reinvented and reinterpreted Rabindranath Tagore in his works, in his words and in his lines. Ray made films on both Tagore and his works, commented on his music, and captured his mentor in sketches. All these creative ventures are recorded in a neat compilation edited by Anwar Hossain Pintu.



Shatyajit Rabindranath came out recently from Chittagong. Yes,

you have read it right. Not Dhaka nor Calcutta, but the book has come out from Chittagong. The editor, in his foreword tells us, how he fails to convince some of the established writers and the pundits on Tagore and Ray to contribute to his effort. Their ambience has compelled Pintu to use local writers from Chittagong and to translate some of the items already published in English. For nine years he had collected anything and everything that involved Tagore and Ray. The result is the book, *Shatyajit Rabindranath*.

Surely, the book is a testimony of passion. It is a gem of a collection. Here we find the vintage Rabindranath as seen by Shatyajit. Just like the pollens attract the bees, Ray's films on Tagore were not without criticism. The compilation has done well to capture the debate on films like *Ghare Baire*, *Charulata*, *Postmaster* or even the documentary *Rabindranath*.

Some of the articles included in the compilation are technical and

purely academic. Others are personal and told from layman's perspective. Some of them are thought provoking and urge us to watch Ray's films or Tagore's books all over again. For example, when Ray explains the opera-glass in Charu's hands, we get to know how that simple glasses becomes symbolic of the boredom of her life. Caught between seriousness and half-seriousness the opera glass on a singer becomes a powerful interpretation of Tagore's heroine. An orthodox critic might find fault in it, but Ray knew what he was doing.

The most impressive part of the compilation is the photographs. It includes some glossy pictures of both Tagore and Ray and gives the book a 'family album' like quality. Some of the pictures are rare and quite telling of the editor's care for details. Throughout the book, you will find the same passion, from stem to stern the book will invite you to travel along.

A Brisk Breeze

Kahat Katar Sal (The year of the famine) Mahmood Nasir Jahangiri Oitijhya February 2002 Taka 60, 64 pages ISBN 984-776-136-1

MAHMOOD Nasir Jahangiri's maiden novel, *Kahat Katar Sal* (The year of the famine), involves the unpleasant memories of the famine of 1974. Jahangiri is touring the recent history of Gazaria under Munshiganj district only to trace a cultural story of the people who live by the Meghna. At first glance, the tour 'sounds' familiar. Memories of the realistic penning of Adaitya Mallabarman, Manik Bandyopadhyay through our mind. The people and places of Jahangiri are kicking and alive, just like the people by Titas or Padma were. Yet Jahangiri's novel takes a novel twist in its narrative technique.

Consciously, Jahangiri has avoided the nineteenth century western style of realistic rendering

of stories. Rather, he has opted for an episodic style, which is much more close to *The Ramayana*. He cunningly calls the chapters his novel as 'kandas' (branches), and models his story after the epic. This is a deliberate move to add local hue to the storytelling, which is characterised by a periodisation of history. The story falls in nine 'kandas'. The first is called 'adikanda (prelude)' and the last an 'utarkanda (postscript)'. The middle seven chapters are named after the seven Bengali months: Baishakh through Kartik. You may ask, 'Why seven?' I asked the same question to the author while leafing through the book he just gave me. "The havoc of the famine of 1974 lasted for seven months. I wanted to use the form of my novel to reflect the period."

Famine, for many of us, is Zainul's paintings in inkremote, distant and 'unreal'. The famine of 1974 is hardly discussed. When tells, it is bound to refer to politics. The memory of the famine is still fresh in lot of people's mind. At least in Jahangiri's mind. He was living in the village when the natural disaster

unleashed its terror in the riverine Bangladesh. So the famine that he tells us of is not so far away and definitely familiar and real.

The novel is a mosaic of the lives of the villagers who have seen both the best and worst of time. Interestingly, Jahangiri is not interested in politics behind the famine. Rather, he talks of economics. The folk songs sung by the street bard Jeetu Mia merely records the pricelist of essentials or the holy verses that are supposed to safeguard them from the calamity.

The novel contains many verses. Here is an example:

Priced at Tk. 7 per maund
Rice became Tk. 14 in Falgun
In Jaishthya it was Tk. 30
In Asaar it was Tk. 40
In Kartik it's Tk. 80. [Translation mine]

Then there wasn't any rice anymore. Looting erupted. Even the wholesalers' supplies were looted even before they reached shore. Such is the power of hunger that made monsters out of men.

Earlier, neighbours fought over the morsels of food picked up by the hens and roosters. The fighting was

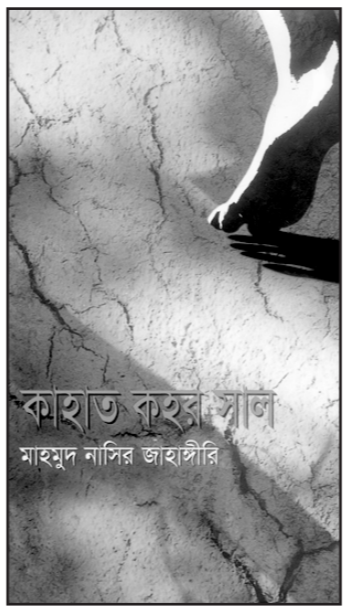
meant to voice the inner emotions in the villages where nothing specially happens. But the same village under the grip of famine sees different types of communication. It is the physical unwillingly brought into the contact of the metaphysical.

The shroud of vanity, feudal aristocracy, weaponry becomes parallel to famine. Famine is portrayed as dead bodies from the underworld. The technique has been made familiar by the Latin writers: magic realism. Jahangiri uses it like Akhtaruzzaman Elias has done in *Khoabnama*. The novel ends with the symbolic burial of the dead (or is it the home-god?) in a 'chest-like grave' and carrying of the spade towards the barren field by Hamid Ali.

The burial is the pronouncement of lot of things including aristocracy and feudal land owning. The landlady loses her status as we find him working in the field.

In the final count, *Kahat Katar Sal* becomes a re-mythologising of the plains of Gazaria. The freshness of the story passes like a brisk breeze, and reminds us of one shady chap-

ter of his history. And the shade is captured aslo in Dhruva Esh's cover illustration.



maunds of sugar and three maunds of dates."

Hafiz is brisk and brilliant in his use of words. In his introductory note, Kazi Akram Hossain enlightens us on different technical aspects of songs. For us, who have no or little knowledge of the original rhyme and rhythm of Persian, the translation may seem out of context.

But these 240 songs of Hafiz deserve special attention because they are done by a luminary figure of our literature. Any history of Bangla literature of our country must refer to its connection to Arabic and Persian just like it does to Sangskrit and Pali. From that perspective, the translation of Hafiz in Bangla is a historical document. It is also a book that celebrates the music of words.

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For a Draught of Vintage

Diwan-I-Hafiz Kazi Akram Hossain Studentways, April 2002 (1961) Taka 200, 240 pages ISBN 984 406 202

KAZI Akram Hossain's *Diwan-I-Hafiz* received critical acclamation immediately after its publication in 1961. Poet Jasimuddin wrote: "I have read some other translations of Hafiz in Bengali, but except a few poems translated by Kazi Nazrul Islam none be compared with the work of Kazi Akram Hossain." Kazi Motahar Hossain also lauded Kazi sahib's feat of imagination and poetic genius. Similar appreciation came from Dr. Sri Kumar Banerjee, Abul Fazal, Humayun



Kabir and the like. Hafiz, the fourteenth century Iranian poet, is difficult to translate. The challenge for any translator is more than crossing a linguistic boundary. The challenge is to imaginatively recreate a lover's world that is both physical and metaphysical. For 600 years, Hafiz has been read in different languages. His songs breathe the freshness of love. In his verse the head finds a rare match in the heart; a quality that was embraced by the Muslim courtiers or gentry class.

Gone are those days when knowing Persian was considered a mark of aristocracy. (Do I dare say English has devoured all other languages?) Kazi Akram Hossain studied Persian before he did his Master's in English from Presidency College in Calcutta. He pursued a career in teaching, and was a good one too.

Prof. Anisuzzaman, in his foreword to *Diwan-I-Hafiz*, regrets "We

are about to forget Kazi Akram Hossain (1896-1963)." Thanks to the reprint of the book by Studentways, our memory about this great poet-translator and teacher is revived.

Even in the sophistry of Hafiz there is a vintage touch of sophistication. I use the word 'sophistry' as a pun that means "practice of using clever arguments that sound convincing but are in fact false." But I also intend *sophi* to mean the philosophy pursued by the Muslim metaphysical poets. An anecdote mentioned by Prof Anisuzzaman may substantiate the point that I am trying to make.

In one of his verses, Hafiz wanted to give away whole Samarkhand and Bukhara just for the sake of a mole of his beloved. Taimur, the ruler, was upset to hear his hard-earned lands being wasted so cheap. Hafiz was summoned to the court, where he quipped to save his skin, "Excellency, you heard it wrong. I meant Do-monkand and C-khormara (meaning two

maunds of sugar and three maunds of dates)."

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FICTION

When the Bell Rang

SANYAT SATTAR

SHE took off her glasses and looked at me, "15 out of 30! How on earth are you going to pass my dear?" I felt really ashamed of my poor grades in mathematics, but at the same time her warm words made me feel at home. I don't know why, but this fat old teacher had always been a huge shelter for me in my early days in the Elementary School.

She was on her late fifties and working for the last year as our class teacher. This was her last winter, at school, as she would be retiring in coming winter. She was old and she walked slowly. Although there is nothing wrong about walking slowly, the students used to laugh at the way she walked. Besides, compared to other teachers, she was indeed very weak and unattractive, but still there was something special in her. What could it be? Her voice? Her eyes? Her personality? I was very young to think about all these things.

She lived in a huge apartment by the bank of the Gulf of Finland in the port city Helsinki. Our school was just half a mile away from her apartment. Everyday she walked to the school, holding an old brown bag in her hand- the same old bag, which she had been carrying for thirty-two year. It was the same old yellow-brick road to school, which she, once took to accompany her children to the same old school. Today the school is still standing there beside the yellow-brick road, the classes are still filled with children, even the same old motherly teacher is there, but her very own children are far away from her. They are now grown-up and busy with their own lives. This is how it goes in

the West- you're grown, then leave the older ones!

She was one of the seniors of the neighbourhood. So, quite obviously everybody respected her. And after the death of her husband, the respect turned more to pity, as now she was all alone- alone in a huge castle.

It was mid-winter. The entire arena was filled with white snowflakes. Surprisingly enough, our classes were scheduled half an hour earlier than summer times. We used to come to the class when the outside was pitch dark. Our teacher, wearing a long over-coat, took an umbrella in one hand and a torch light in another, used to come to the school earlier than anyone else. And she walked faster than she used to walk during the summer. According to the students, the snow gave her the energy to walk so fast. It was rather jumping than walking and our lovely old teacher was like a jumping rabbit on the snow!

I don't know why, but she liked me the most. I never was the best student of the class and neither did I ever participate in any co-curricular activities. On the contrary, I was extremely dull in every single subject, especially in maths. Accepting my all minus points, she liked me and she liked me a lot. I suppose, it was all in my eyes, as she quite often used to grab my hand and say, "Your eyes are just like Mike's..." Mike was her son, who had settled down in Spain. My teacher really missed her son. As far as I know, she had two other daughters, who lived somewhere in the northern part of Finland.

It was December and the merriment of Christmas was everywhere. I was busy to make socks wishes by the fireplace with my

friends. Another exciting thing was to write down the wishes on a piece of paper and put them under the carpet before getting to bed. We believed that the wishes were surely reached to Santa Claus, as in the morning the paper was gone!

My teacher invited me to her place for a Christmas party on the Christmas Eve. I had plenty of invitations from my friends, but I certainly could not say 'no' to my teacher. So I cancelled all other programmes and went to her apart-



ment. It was well decorated and quite a huge one for a single widow. My eyes were captured still on a huge photograph at the wall. It was a picture of a boy, who was messed with ice cream. "He's Mike. My dear Mike!" I didn't notice that she was staring at that very picture right beside me. She continued, "Guess what? Mike's coming today over here. Mike's coming to me... Oh dear! After ten long years..."

I noticed tears in her eye corners, but she didn't let them wet her cheeks, maybe because I would not be a right thing to shed tears in front of a student.

We two had a great time together. We talked, we saw albums, we laughed. But time again her topic came to the centre point of 'Mike'. She even mentioned how her *Mike* was equally poor in mathematics just like me. For a while I totally forgot that she was my teacher, and I her student. I was

Mike", but it was not him. The neighbour came to wish "Merry Christmas". She looked very disappointed. Again the doorbell, but again it was somebody else. I noticed really strange things happening to her. She was time and again opening the door, although the bell was not ringing at all. When I asked her about this, all she said was, "He's at the door... he's at the door..." This time I became really scared, as she was acting like a lunatic! She started to cry. She stopped, wiped her eyes and started to laugh. To escape from this abnormality I left the apartment as swiftly as possible. But I was hopeful that pretty soon Mike would come and give the tender to her sorrow-stricken mother. Then everything will be as it was before and we shall be able to see the jolly loving smile of her in our math's class, and she will rebuke me for getting all those poor grades time and again.

I could not sleep the whole night. I was so scared that I couldn't even tell the story to anyone at home. I was thinking that How could anybody possibly become so mean to cut off all family ties with such a loving mother and stay in abroad for so long period of time! I decided that I'd never do the same thing when I'll grown-up.

The next morning I rushed to her apartment to see whether Mike had showed-up after all. I was surprised to see so many people gathering there. What on earth is going on? I pushed the crowd and went to the doorsteps. The door was open. The floor was covered with snow and there she was lying half inside and half outside the door.

Mike was still in Spain. But the door is flung open now, only a bit too much!

REFLECTION

The Homecoming

SYED MAQSUJ JAMIL

MOST of us are familiar with the inquisitive query, "Where do you come from?" This is quite interesting since Bangladesh is not that big in size, like India or America for instance. India is a country of large number of ethnic groups, speaking different languages, practicing their own customs and professing their own faiths. Coast to coast America has an expanse of over 5,000 miles. Here, it should not take more than a day to go from Teknaf to Tetulia. Yet, we find it useful in finding a common ground and a kinship of the soil.

Dhaka is now a city of 1.13 million people. At least two to three generations have grown up here, witnessing the provincial town developing in to a mega-city. I belong to that generation. Still, I am caught in contradictions about my umbilical affinity, about my roots. Born 55 years back, the protuberance of my umbilical chord was buried in Dhaka. I was told it was buried somewhere near the mosque of my maternal grandfather's place. Can I say my roots are in Dhaka? Had it not been for my dad I could have said so. He has such a large presence in my thoughts and consciousness. Not because most fathers are role models for their sons. There is a twinge of sadness in me about him that he has not been served well by life. He was an exile in the city of Dhaka to the last day of life. I regard his zest of longing to go back to his village home.

My father came from a family of land owning gentry living in the rural hinterland of Faridpur wedged between the river Padma and Ariakhan. In his living habits he represented the quintessential village folk. It amused my relations from my mother's side. My city bred mother tried hard to hide her embarrassment. He stuck to his ways. It was a time when good upbringing meant women should follow their husbands meekly. The custom was not different for a city-bred lady. She carried on with the deprivations of living in a village in the late forties and early fifties. However there were times when I saw her crying in the corner.

It was a typical village in the flood plains of Bengal. The monsoon turned it in to a cluster of islands in a sea of water. It was the time for harvesting the Aus and jute. The yield was low and the rice was coarse, yet the fragrance of steaming rice smelt of plenty. Jute harvesting brought many pests. They did not make my father and the likes of his village folks to loathe the village life. Not long, when the monsoon is on the ebb the traders will come to buy the jute fiber. For them the time of hope was right around the corner. I never found the zest of living missing in my father's love for his land. He loved it fully. When I look back I find our pucca building a redeeming convenience in the water world. It rained for days, pouring in the flowing grace of a painter's brush. From the iron bars of the window, I kept gazing at the minaret of the family mosque. And I vividly remember the profound pleasure of performing a ritual on the face of my father snuffing in mustard oil through the nose, rubbing it in to the navel through the little finger, and pouring a palmful on the crown. Then he would take a dip in to the pond, once twice and few more. My child's eyes beheld it with wonder. I remembered the village folks flocking our visitors' tin shed to collect their requirement of salt and kerosene. It was basic subsistence with rice, salt and kerosene. The clerk often serving as my lodging master kept record of the proceedings. My father carried the aura of a master when he visited the tin shed.

When the early autumn came, the rains stopped for days. Shiny days took over. Long patches of fluffy clouds spread across the blue sky like banners. The heat glistened but I do not remember of any one bitterly cursing the heat. Life was full like the high mark of water everywhere and the emerald green paddy. The ears of paddy plants managed to bob out of the water caressing the rims of the cruising boats. My father looked at the bobbing plants and shared the optimism that the yield would be good this year. Ours was a land of broadcast Aman. The boat with a bamboo canopy glided through the water to the village market. He rested at the tea stall and acknowledged the respects paid by the village folks. It was with effortless ease and spontaneous joy he lazed through the market, buying city made things that housekeeping by a city bred lady needed. Our house-keeper was always at his side ready to oblige by holding out the umbrella. Sometime he put me on his shoulder. My share of pleasure was the cotton candy; the coin shaped 'batashas'.

The sun was setting when we reached home. Soon, the late autumn was here. The traders came to buy jute. It was the time of the Korean War. Heaped on to the horse's back, the jute fiber was carried to Goalanda. From there the steamers carried it to Narayanganj. The horses filed in a line and plodded on. I could understand my father's spirit soared majestically.

Winter followed soon. It was the season of plenty. The haystack in the middle of the courtyard bulged at the side. At the far end the paddy harvest was put to steaming heat for the grains to separate from the pod. My father the 'Shaijabhai' looked at it sitting on a wooden chair under the veranda of a tin shade. He was happy. God almighty has blessed him with the best stretch of land in the world. Folks from the city would flock to the village in a festive mood. The date tree juice collected in earthen jars is served in the misty morning with the light filtering through the trees all around. It was the rice cake soaked in date tree juice and milk that made the breakfast most satisfying. I loved to look intently at the cream to float up with milk being churned in a tin jar. There was another delicacy my father loved much. It was pumpkin thinly sliced by scouring material in to noodle threads soaked in milk and 'gur' (molasses) syrupy mixture. Everything was pure. The taste was divine.

There were not many items in those days for a child living in a village to covet and fret about. Wednesday was the market day. I looked forward to the day. For I told my father to bring me Sitaram Basak's Adarshalipi or the basic learning of Sitaram Basak. It had a cover of red paper. The pages were coarse. It was the last few pages that attracted me the most. There were little poems and age-old sayings in it. Why is he not turning up? And he turned up before the darkness could come. The big basket was brought down. Everything kept coming out, combs from Jessore, hurricane and many other essential household items. But where was my Adarshalipi? My father held it out to me. It had the value of Alibaba's treasure to a child. His brothers were away at different towns doing job and studying. The guardian of the family their 'Mamu', maternal uncle, locally famed as 'Raja Qazi' found him most suitable to look after the rural holdings. In every way he was the son of the soil. Soon he was to pull up his roots and shift to Dhaka. The youngest of the brothers was back at home and he was married. It looked he was going to have a large brood of children. We came to Dhaka. For him it was a sad exodus. A reprieve for my mother. The desperate efforts he made to build his fortune were inconstant in their rewards. Every year he kept visiting his village till a time when the Padma started advancing to our village. The river, which was miles away, kept coming close to the village. It was at the door. The land which my family knew to be their land for more than 100 years was at the mercy of the Padma. It did not relent. Everything was gone, devoured by the river. It flowed mightily with great current and vengeful disdain. Not a single structure could be moved. The buildings, the tin sheds, the

mosque, my grandfather and grandmother's grave met watery end.

It was the middle of the sixties. There was no respectable home-stead, yet he kept returning to the sandy waste. Sometime, large sand banks appeared. They disappeared before it could be developed in to habitable settlement. I could see the glimmer in his eyes whenever village folks came to visit him. He dwelled in the city but lived in the village that flowed with the Padma. Indeed he was an exile in the city to the last day of his life.

He is gone. There was no reason for me to resurrect the spirit. I was there in the village for few years of my childhood. There were no friends to return to, no close relations to visit, no graves to stand before. It did never occur to me what roots are all about. There was no idealism in me to trace back my path. To me the pleasure of coming back home was to return after a day's work. Nasirpur never held any charm for me except for the occasional visits of share-croppers who raised crops in the sand banks that appeared.

A day came to put a strange feeling of attachment in me. I was on a visit to Kasiani village home of one of my friends. The path was different in the times I can never go back. Taking a big boat (Goyna Nouka) to Bhagyakul, there we took the steamer to Narayanganj. Soon we reached the village home of my friend. The unpaved trail had bamboo bushes on both the sides. There was something in the shadows that pensively lengthened across the trail.

We were at his house. After resting for a while at the visitors tin shed with a big pond in front of it, we were invited to the inner courtyard. The scenario revived my long neglected memories. There was an old pucca building on the western side. Right behind it was the mosque. In front of the house was the courtyard. A tin shed on the southern side had a flock of pigeons on it. They fluttered their wings on to the roof. Cooing rhythmically they flew up and above. I was lost in the sight. Some of them were white doves. Others were reddish brown, there was a quite a number of variety. The hen was pecking at the paddy grains; the chicks followed the hen like well-raised babies. Well aware that the trouble may pounce from the blue, the hen moved very carefully with the fullness of a matron. The cowered was at the last corner, tucked away for closer attention. There were trees all around the courtyard. They rose together skyward in friendliness.

The late autumn has just begun. White clumps of stationary clouds in the sky give it a picture perfect setting. I went out of the house. There I found a canal flowing gently onward with a bamboo crossing over it. A serene longing settled inside me. I have come back home. Its trees its air its birds the entirety of the setting was fondly eyeing its son. The prodigal son was back home. Is it what homecoming means, then let it be so? My roots have been brought back to life. I could understand why my father kept going back home.



POEM

Our Guns

by Fardeen Chowdhury

we brought out lives they bought out knives, the stores closed easily with hours left to blame; cholera struck the sun when we decided to be men, the children were spent in their finery went fishing and we unloaded anger like garbage.

they brought in ministers, doctors, religion, books that promised to explain her strange condition some say she will never walk again. others, hesitate to predict. "I'm afraid of my wounds" she seemed to say, "and afraid to remove them".

once the fire was doused, we all went home. no one cared what happened--the old problem stood there--the last tree on earth.