

REVIEW ARTICLE

Alive and Kicking - English Poetry from the Subcontinent

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Stet by Menka Shivdasani. Calcutta and New Delhi: myword! Press, 2003.

Rhododendron Lane by Nuzhat Amin Mannan. Dhaka: Self-published, 2004.

In welcoming these two new collections it should be in order to start with a general comment or two on the present-day status of the subcontinent's English poetry. It can at least be a gesture towards redressal--for there is a tendency to downplay the significance of this body of verse. Salman Rushdie's notorious introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* (1997), for instance, relegates Indian poetry in English to the role of poor cousin to its prose counterpart, and denies it entry into the anthology.

Rushdie's precise formulation of his stand, both in this introduction and in the slightly altered version bearing the Hatterresque title "Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You!", deserves a close look. In the former he declares peremptorily that

India's "English-language poets, with a few distinguished exceptions (Arun Kolatkar, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, to name just three), did not match the quality of their counterparts in prose." The qualificatory phrase "to name just three" seems to indicate that the list could be considerably extended. But in the essay's other version this phrase is dropped while Dom Moraes is included in the list of poets--which seems to imply that no further extension of the list is permissible. And yet in this essay Rushdie also quotes admiringly from the late lamented Agha Shahid Ali, regarding whom the critical consensus is that he was undeniably a major talent. That makes five. Then again, how can Nissim Ezekiel be left out? Rushdie could, I suppose, for personal reasons: Ezekiel had supported the ban on the *Satanic Verses*. And what about Parthasarathy or Mehrotra or Imtiaz Dharker, Sujata Bhatt, Kamala Suraiya (formerly Kamala Das)?

No, Rushdie's imperious dismissal of Indian English verse cannot be justified even within his own frame of reference. It is nothing but the "imperialism" of Rushdie's chosen genre, prose fiction; other genres are turned into marginalized "others." There could be concealed jealousy as well: Rushdie's sole published poem is a pathetic piece written in response to the fatwa. That it is, as far as I know, the only poem to appear in *Granta* tells you something about present-day conceptions of literature.

And yet, if I apply what I call the re-readability test (only stuff you enjoy re-reading possesses unquestioned literary value) I find that the best poems of a sizeable number of Indian English poets qualify. Among writers of prose fiction, R. K. Narayan, clearly does. But Rushdie? Very little of his, even from the days before he lost both looks and talent. (Sorry--that's a cheap shot.)

As if attitudes like Rushdie's or of those responsible for *Granta's* editorial policy weren't bad enough, Indian English poets make things more difficult for themselves by wasting energy on personal animosities and wrong-headed debates. Parthasarathy and Mehrotra don't like each other; so Mehrotra doesn't include Parthasarathy in his anthology of twelve Indian English poets. Mahapatra in an article reprinted on this page (*Of The Lowly Potato: Indian English Poetry Today*, January 10, 2004) was dismissive of the city-centred ironic mode that dominates contemporary Indian English poetry and suggested that one reason for its prominence was patronage by foreign editors and publishers. To illustrate his point he singled out the late Alan Ross, who as editor of *London Magazine* promoted the Indian English urban ironists but rejected Mahapatra, who wrote a different kind of poetry. I can deliver two pinpricks to deflate Mahapatra's argument. First, Ross was very catholic in his taste and printed whatever he considered interesting, irrespective of its aesthetic orientation: among those he promoted when they were little-known were Derek Walcott, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Tony Harrison, none of whom fits into the so-called ironic mould. Second, Mahapatra's own ascent

into literary prominence was boosted by the previous editor of *Poetry* and the Georgia University Press, which published a collection of his work.

The point of my remarks is to underscore the importance of what we could call aesthetic liberalism, which should enable us to appreciate diverse genres and literary modes. It will certainly bring home to us the continuing vitality of the Anglophone tradition in subcontinental poetry, and women's contribution to it, which has been conspicuous almost since its inception: Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Suraiya. Unsurprisingly, among younger poets, women are better represented than in previous generations.

Menka Shivdasani was critically acclaimed on the appearance of her first collection, the outcome of twelve years of apprenticeship, *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990), which Bruce King in the revised edition of his book *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (2001) describes as "one of the best first books of poetry to appear during the 1990s." King goes on to note that Shivdasani "anticipated many of the new characteristics of Bombay poetry as it would develop during the 1990s." As readers will recall from her moving memoir of Nissim Ezekiel published on this page (*Nissim Ezekiel: you missed out a comma in the fourth line*, January 24, 2004), she went through some sort of tutelage under that doyen of Indian English poets. Ezekiel remains a living presence, creatively assimilated, in Shivdasani's work, thus refuting Mahapatra's contention that the poetic mode he pioneered is played out. Shivdasani has learned much from Ezekiel's sharp observations, his mordant humour, his use of the rhythms and intonation of standard Indian English. These qualities are given a feminist edge in her idiolect:

You ought to have told me
it would all crack up one day.
Bricked over, we lived
in worlds we couldn't share,
away from the bustle and ticking clock
whose hands touch
only once a day.

Shivdasani has a fondness for rhyme, but should check the urge to force it on her lines, as she does once or twice, resulting in odd word order ("... that once she so well knew") or slack rhythm ("... down into the depths out of sight").

The present volume is her second collection, and includes fourteen poems from the first, together with thirty-one new poems (one of these is a prose poem); and a poignant short story set against a riot-torn background: almost certainly the recent holocaust in Gujarat, which also haunts some of the poems. It can therefore be regarded as a selection of her creative output over a quarter century; and it is doubtless a notable achievement.

Unlike India, Bangladesh produces only the odd book of English verse from time to time, which makes the appearance of *Rhododendron Lane* particularly welcome. It is a debut collection by Nuzhat Amin Mannan, who is on the English faculty of Dhaka University, and though relatively slim it distills many years of writing. Personal ties take centre stage but equally conspicuous is the sharply observed social scene, with details of individual personalities subjected to a vivisectioning gaze:

Her hormone-declined face was
like a peeling *paratha*, one that was
fried and then went soggy, gone to waste.
The personal poems lean towards the confessional mode and deal with romantic, marital as well as filial ties. "Valentine: For Husband," one of the most successfully realized poems in the book, compares well in its sustained intensity with some of Kamala Suraiya's best-known poems.

Nuzhat Mannan has made a highly promising debut and poetry lovers will expect more from her pointed pen.

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Diary of a Mad Housewife

MENKA SHIVDASANI

Once upon a time, I had a faithful companion who followed me around like a god...Oops, I'm seeing things upside down and inside out again; what I mean is, this companion followed me around like a dog, woofing and barking its way into every waking moment, and sometimes in my dreams as well, fitful and fleaful though they were. (Though sometimes, of course, they were gleeful too, like when I'd bitten somebody's nose off, or sunk my teeth into a hand.)

And since they say that you and your dog eventually begin to look like each other, I began to sprout a few canines and my nostrils flared like balloons. Sometimes I kept my companions on a leash; other times it shot off down the street, with me panting behind, as I almost lost my arm. Did it ever stop? Oh yes, but only when it was hungry and wanted to devour me whole.

One day, feeling threatened, I took my faithful companion to a vet, who gazed, confused, at us, lapping and barking inside a single skin, and asked which of the two needed to be put away. It didn't help that my companion and I pointed at each other simultaneously, and yowled. So the vet took matters in hand and decided to put me to sleep, or rather, take me to bed, and shed his white coat along the way.

I woke up one morning and found my faithful companion had died quietly in my arms. There is still an emptiness within me where my friend used to rest its head, and the leash feels strangely slack, except when my new companion tugs at me with the weight of his hand.

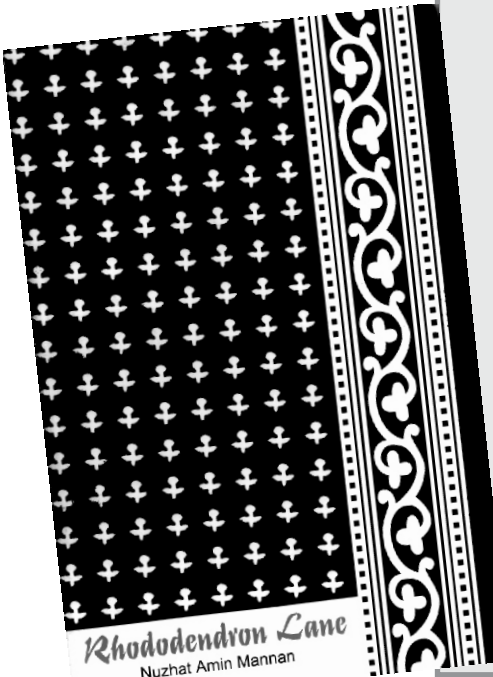
But, of course, my new companion is not quite so faithful to me. He is a vet, you see, and there are so many traumatized creatures baying in this world. He helps them all, for a price, naturally, while I, under his expert care, pretend to be perfectly well.



Valentine For Husband

NUZHAT AMIN

I don't like you because you are powerful or you squash my love into pulp.
I like you because you are the name my children carry to school.
Yes, I am worried about shame, rather be desired by you and sometimes be forced by you--rather you than anybody else. I came to your door--yes, I did--marriage--that's only a woman's headache. I like you because you let me take a break from you so that I can work even though you take my earnings instantly like robbery homemade. I wash myself in a stinking bath and comb my hair tenderly with oil, knowing the breastmilk will keep pregnancy away.
And then I wait for you--to salivate.
I don't like you one bit--when you leave your jobs or beat me black and blue I spread my arms defensively and my eyes are burning in fear, anger and shame.
I have lots of reasons to run away but I know I should let you leave us first if you made your mind to.



TRAVEL WRITING

Development and NGOs, empowerment and upliftment, that whole shebang is big business, a considerable slice of our economic pie. Bangladesh is rife with NGOs, just crawling with the suckers. They mean many things to many men, and no doubt, women. Here Manosh goes on a field trip within a field trip (from Dhaka to Nilphamari, then to a village in Nilphamari) and runs into darbesh cults and student leaders.

Nilphamari Field Trip

MANOSH CHOWDHURY
(written in collaboration with Khademul Islam)

'So, what would you like to have, *darbesh baba*?' asked the keeper of the old teashop, leaning forward almost into my bearded face. He wore a white *tohbon* [lungi] and a kurta-like shirt, with a pale rose thread from some *mazar* around his neck, and his breath smelling faintly of *siddhi* (marijuana). I felt a bit awkward but remained smiling.

'Tea! Just a cup of tea will be fine.'

But Ahasan felt compelled to protest on my behalf.

'Look here, he is our teacher,' he said. But the shopkeeper paid no heed to his words and, while ambling over to his cash box, ordered the waiter, a little boy, to serve us two cups of tea. Then murmured, more to himself than us, 'But you should eat something at my shop.'

Thick bricks jutted out from the plaster of the wall beside me, an old calendar with a painting of *Krishna in gokul* hung above, and beside it a framed photo of *Baba Loknath*. We sat on a low bench while an uneven, high bench in front of us served as our table. The 60-watt electric lamp cast a feeble light, and swirling smoke, alternately spider-web and solid-screen, reminded of a creative light director on the stage.

It was hazy, a deepening twilight in early November. The first week of Ramzan. I felt, as we waited for the tea, that Ahasan shouldn't have spoken out. A *darbesh* (saint), I thought, with the spoon chinking loudly against the teacups as the little boy made the tea and the shopkeeper floated dreamy-eyed on his sea of *siddhi*, why not? I did not assume the title of *'Darbesh Baba'*? Questions began to run through my head: What does a *darbesh* have that the rest of us don't? Or, to put it a little more academically, what are the qualities people think a *darbesh* should have? But who knew the answer to that? And the *darbeshes* themselves certainly weren't saying anything. It's not

just my beard, I thought, it's the kind of beard I had, its waywardness, the total lack of any sort of urban styling, which had caused the shopkeeper to address me with the honorific. For a moment I thought of asking him if he belonged to any of the local *lines* of saints, or different schools of adherents. But didn't. After all, I too belonged to a developmental school. And by not asking about local *darbeshes* I hoped in return to be spared questions about whether I worked for any NGO there.

I didn't know much about the legendary saints of north Bengal except for Shah Mahkhdum. But here in Nilphamari, up north beside Rangpur, it was no great wonder that there were a lot of them, with a huge number of followers of each sect. In a way, saints are at the heart of Bangladesh. As soon as you get out of Dhaka, you are within a mosaic of various spiritual and mystical schools and thoughts. Beyond that I didn't know much. And was I correct even in assuming that? How much did I really know about this aspect of Bangladesh? I didn't, and this lack of knowledge annoyed me, as if I was losing my academic awareness, my training in anthropology.

The teacups were small and the tea was finished all too soon, which meant that I couldn't sit there and sip tea and think on the subject. What should I do, ask for a second round of tea? Or, I thought facetiously, go ahead and take up the original offer of *siddhi*? I looked at Ahasan sitting next to me, looking at me with a far-off gaze.

Luckily, the shopkeeper resolved the dilemma by offering me a *shandesh*. Though what I really wanted was a second cup of tea, I was happy with the exchange. And a little later came out of the shop with the taste of a sweetmeat on my tongue. In the murky light, spider webs of smoke were still being spun behind me, rendering the shop mysterious. I felt the entire town was like that, vaguely mysterious, unidentifiable, as if it were any other *mofussil* town, as if it were Meherpur (the small town I had

grown up in), and not Nilphamari. Two little words *darbesh baba* seemed to have caused a metamorphosis within me. And I felt it wouldn't be easy to communicate with the developmental team I had come to work with. I became a bit sad, I don't know why.

I had come to Nilphamari yesterday to link up with my eight-member research team. Before dawn, when it was still quite dark. The district office of the development organization was located in a nice place. In fact, one had to think hard for a while whether it was in town or in a rural area, as frequently happens with most NGO offices outside Dhaka. The guesthouse was inside the office building itself. The team was going to stay there a month, while I was there only on a two-day visit, which seemed the current norm for NGO team leaders engaged in social research. My team was excited about the project. Which accounted for the fact that two of them, despite the very early hour, despite the fact that they themselves had barely two hours of sleep after *sehri*, immediately sat down with me and launched into a full-scale *adda*. It didn't occur to them to show me to my room, which incidentally was the VIP room, also the only vacant room. The regular office people, whom I later met at breakfast, seemed bemused by this informal style of leadership. A bemusement I felt too, but for an entirely different reason, for it was Ramzan and some of my colleagues were fasting, and though it was not expected of me, a Hindu, to fast, yet it seemed impolite to eat. But I was starving, and one look at the table--*parata*, *bhaji*, sweets, all cooked by a full-time employee--was enough to make me tuck in heartily. Unable to mask my happy face.

Finally, after I said I wouldn't feel comfortable taking the VIP room, which then went to our female colleagues since it had an attached bathroom, I got a room to share with others. While the rest of the team were getting ready to go on the field trip, I sat by the window. The sun was barely visible through the fog, with a yellow light on the pale trees--some *shimul* (silk cotton), some *neem*, and quite a few others I did not recognize. The scene stirred faint memories in me, of something dusky and gray, or something that perhaps was unreal and only imagined memory. I tried to fix this memory into a nice frame, this scene so close to me, just before my eyes. Which now were burning a little.

'You must take a bath, sir, and then a little rest,' someone suggested, seeing me sitting at the window quietly. I felt offended that my workmates thought that

me. And this is not really a village. This is a district town!'

'But Nilphamari is very different from Dhaka.'

'That's a different point altogether. But, unlike you, I am from a mofussil town.'

'Yes, that's true. But a trip with a development mission, an NGO man, doesn't that feel very different? Doesn't it have a specific meaning?'

I looked at him. Ahasan was sharp as ever. He had guessed at my ambivalence about this whole venture.

'Yes. It does. It's as if I have to



a night journey would make me feel tired. I said nothing.

'You definitely are going with us, aren't you?'

I couldn't tell them that right then I didn't want to go out. Not because I was tired, but because I wanted to keep sitting by the window. Ahasan looked at me searchingly. 'So how are you feeling? Are you all right?'

'Yes. Why shouldn't I be? I am not a white man unused to the land.'

'But you've been living in Dhaka for so long!'

'I travel outside Dhaka all the time. Villages are not fictional to

me. And this is not really a village. This is a district town!'

'But Nilphamari is very different from Dhaka.'

'That's a different point altogether. But, unlike you, I am from a mofussil town.'

'Yes, that's true. But a trip with a development mission, an NGO man, doesn't that feel very different? Doesn't it have a specific meaning?'

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rural Bangladesh as a backdrop! She was going to take these images back with her to Italy. Or was it UK? She showed us the images on the square-inch silver screen. There I was, smoking, swinging my feet by the side of the van, set against a huge, green, fertilized background. *Krishna in Mathura*, I thought, here as liberator of Mathura's inhabitants. What better proof of my second identity than that image: A Dhakaiea ignoramus turned emancipator. Still, despite the jocularity, I didn't feel good about myself.

So I asked the rickshaw-puller, later at the evening, when I moving around the town. 'So who is your hero here?'

'Here?'

'Yes, let's suppose Nilphamari. Or north Bengal.'

'And you mean a hero?' he asked again while still pedalling.

'Yes, an *ustad*. A guru. Who you feel you are loyal to, or from whom you taking guidance.'

'Why should I need guidance?'

'Yes, that's true.' I nodded in agreement. He had been hired on an hourly contract. He informed me that though he was originally from Dinajpur, the adjacent district, in reality his village was closer to Nilphamari town than Dinajpur town. He was living here with his only son. His wife and daughter were still in his home village. 'Why?' I asked. Because, he explained, he couldn't support the whole family in the town. But he needed to work here in order to look after his son, who was proving to be a good student. So he and his wife had decided on this particular arrangement.

'And where is your son?'

He seemed shy about replying to my question, but then said. 'He is at home now, studying. I have rented a room. Last month I managed to buy him an electric lamp.'

'So he is studying here?'

'Yes. You know, he is in class seven at the district school. Next year he will take the examination for scholarship. With your blessing of course, *bhai*.'

I didn't say anything. I knew what his next question was going to be. And finally, after some more pedalling, he asked it. 'Are you working in an NGO?'

'Yes.'

'You are. You get a good salary, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think my son someday will get a job in your organization?'

I managed to evade answering him by pointing to a roadside sweetmeat shop and asking him to stop there. I went inside. When I got back on, he didn't ask me the question again.

After we came out of the smoky teashop, Ahasan and I started walking towards the guesthouse. My bus to Dhaka would leave in three hours. I told him about my conversation with the rickshaw-puller, about his hopes for his son being employed by an NGO. Ahasan didn't reply, and in the dark I couldn't make out the expression on his face. I also mentioned that though I had searched high and low earlier that day for a flute (as a souvenir), I hadn't been able to get one.

'Did you really think you'd find one here?' he asked me.

'Well, I don't know. I just thought that I would get one here, but they don't have any in the bazaar. If there's a flute player around here, he must be getting it from some other place. Anyway, what use is a flute, it's not like food you can eat.' My not finding the flute had left me feeling exasperated.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Ahasan asked me:

'Why didn't you say something when the shopkeeper called you *darbesh baba*?'

'Why? What difference would it have made?'

'You are not a *darbesh*. Don't you think it was wrong?'

'But then I am not a liberator either, but here they look at me that way.'

'But being a *darbesh* raises expectations in people. They

want certain things from you.'

'And what about our work here? Isn't it the same thing? It's a very thin line we are straddling here. For a moment I just wanted to be a *darbesh*. So what? And both of us didn't say anything for a very, very long time.'

The bus started quite a bit late. One reason was a youth leader, who was seen off by a whole crowd of fellow male colleagues, all of whom kept calling out his name. It was evident that he was a bigwig of one of the youth fronts of a national political party. Or maybe an ex-student leader, going to the capital city to pay a call on his bosses. The seat next to mine was empty; actually the only one that was empty. He came and sat down, his face still wreathed in false smile of a 'leader'. The bus started then. He finished his waving at the window, then turned to me.

'You look like a fine arts student. Aren't you?'

'No, I am not.' I said, very softly, waiting for the inevitable next question. He paused now, eyes sparkling, thinking of how to pose it, then gave up and came out with it.

'Where's your *desh*?'

'I don't think it's important. But it is Kushtia.' I replied, still softly. Meherpur would be too remote for this leader.

'Kushtia! Lalon's place. See, I was on the right track! So you must have a particular *darbesh line*, aren't you? You know, our party (and here he named the political party he belonged to) is now taking you *shangskritik* folks seriously...earlier we made a mistake in underestimating people like you. You too are a part of our national history. So, tell me ... ha, ha... aren't you from a *line*?'

Now it was my turn to smile broadly, to switch on a facsimile of the smile he had been beaming to his disciples who came to see the great leader off. Whatever *line* I followed, it was certainly not anything this *neta* would know about!

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