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# On Bloomsday : all this because of a book!

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Bloomsday's origin lies in James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses*. It is an account of a single day, June 16, 1904 in the lives of the citizens of Dublin. It has two main characters, Leopold Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus, the father-to-be and his surrogate son. The plot--if so conventional a term can be used to describe a book that broke so many conventions in its day, which, in the words of another author, gave such 'a violent evolutionary lurch' to the form of the novel--revolves around these two, who wander about in Dublin during the whole day missing each other, narrowly, here and there. But fate is at hand, they are destined to meet, they finally do, get drunk, have hallucinations, recover in a cabman's shelter, then stumble on to Leopold Bloom's home. Where Leopold's wife Molly Bloom is in bed awake with her thoughts, and from whence Stephen soon departs, leaving Leopold to climb into bed beside Molly and go to sleep exactly as Joyce himself used to, with his feet towards the head of the bed--('reclined laterally, left, with right and left legs flexed, the indexfinger and thumb of the right hand resting on the bridge of the nose, in the attitude depicted on a snapshot photograph made by Percy Apjohn, the childman weary, the manchild in the womb.')

But Molly will still be awake--and will be for about twenty-five thousand words more, all without punctuation--for throughout the whole day, till these last pages, we readers have essentially been in male company, have walked and



PARIS. A fog-wrapped evening; lights glow in the streets. It was time now to leave Europe. Having decided to leave via Syria, I had spent the better part of the day at various travel agents' offices. Suddenly I thought of James Joyce; then, wanting to properly round off my last night in France, I decided to call on him. I had met Joyce just the other day at a literary get-together, and he had invited me to his home.

I had never read James Joyce's writing completely, end to end. Till this day he continues to elude me. Whenever I came up for air after a dive into his wordocean, moss, seaweed, other strange, wonderful marine life silkily clung to my skin. It left me feeling restless, uncertain. The experience dazzled both the eye and the mind, an unforgettable thing. All those colours, such varying speeds, glimpses of shimmering ruins beneath the waves. If only the saltwater didn't sting one's eyes, it would have been possible to see so much more but to stay submerged for any length of time in this particular sea of language one needed the deep-sea diver's special gear. Though I did know that our language, our very mode of thinking, was now tied inextricably to this fertile, bubbling genius. In other words, in no small measure have we been defined by this Paris-based, Irish writer's freewheeling prose. I was amazed that I, a Bengali from a thousand miles away, a stranger on the opposite shore, felt such happy kinship with him.

I climbed up the stairs. Joyce himself was standing at the top of his heavily-curtained flat. A lush carpet; a large, stylishly-decorated yet old-fashioned apartment. Every bulb was ablaze. Joyce's glasses had very thick lenses, the light occasionally glinting off his blurred vision. Again, it reminded me of the sea. The man was ethereal, not of solid earth.

Our talk turned to matters Indian; what were the writers there doing? Joyce mentioned Rabindranath Tagore's name with utmost respect. One should never read translations, he declared, translations were not literature. And yet, how astonishing that this Bengali genius could be found in them. He had seen Tagore in Paris. Had Bengali absorbed many other languages? Was Rabindranath's language as such? I saw that it was language itself, words, that he was most fascinated by.

He was reticent about himself. But certain hints about the Work In Progress were forthcoming. One night Joyce had been reading a certain section of the new work to a friend (I forget whether it was

display a few blocks away. And so on.

Over the years --the first Bloomsday was held in 1954--the festival, paralleling the growth of what has been called the Joyce industry, has evolved from the small pilgrimage made by avid Joyceans and academics into a huge, noisy cavalcade of tourists, a cultural jamboree, a festival held not only in Dublin but replicated, in lesser ways, globally, in places such as Shanghai and Costa Rica. Hordes of tourists, a huge mix of plain gawkers and tourists, amateur Joyceans, book lovers, literary and academic types start from George's Street in the morning and end up at O'Connell Street at late at night. And throughout the day, as befits this gargantuan, bawdy, rambunctious, roistering novel, there is plenty to eat and drink and see: barmaids and Edwardian boaters and yellow gloves and pints of Guinness and men in stunts and street theater and mimes and Joyce readings. And then there are seminars and discussions, the Joyce specialists and academics in cloistered rooms wrangling over commas in the Kidd versus the Habler editions. Entire doctoral theses have been generated from disputed passages in *Ulysses*. The Joyce industry keeps on getting fatter and sleeker.

And this year was the centenary Bloomsday, when the festival will last till the end of August. When this time the revelry is particularly high-octane, when Bloomsday began with a free breakfast for 10,000 people in Edwardian dress and went on from there. Bloomsday is now officially, in the words of one journalist surveying the scene, "the world's biggest simultaneous celebration of a single piece of art."

All this because of one book!

*Ulysses* is about language. The English language. Which can make it inordinately difficult for the reader whose mother tongue is not English. Faced with the problem of writing a modern epic within the confines of a single day--the universe in a microcosm--Joyce ran into technical problems. For example, one concerned the interior monologue, the much-discussed 'stream of consciousness': how would readers differentiate the interior thoughts of the different characters. Who is who?

Joyce solved the problem by assigning a characteristic rhythm to the thought-stream of each of his three main

characters. Stephen's, as befits the poet-Jesuit, is lyrical, subtle, somewhat clotted, much more conscious of words--not as signs for images but its more meditative aspects--than the other two. Bloom's own rhythm is quick, jaunty, darting, clipped--a fit vehicle for an intelligent, but not over-educated, ad salesman. Molly Bloom's is different, more like a prose poem, short words fitted into long phrases, where we have to grasp her mind all in one piece.

It was these aspects of the language that threw me, somebody whose native language was not English, off from *Ulysses* when I first opened it. *Rhythm?* I had no ear then for English rhythms. Rhythms are internalized as an infant within the culture--any Bengali will automatically respond to *chol ray chol, urdo gogonay bajay madol*, for example--or else it is acquired over a lifetime's involvement with the language. A paragraph like the one below, when Bloom is falling asleep beside his wife, defeated me then:

*With?*  
*Sindbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer and Whinbad the Whaler and Ninbad the Nailer and Finbad the Failer and*

I recall one more fact. He had said he would give me the portions of the manuscript that had already been published, part of the novel in the making. You must, he added, read them on board the ship. And to let him know from there what I really thought of it. About the work and its language, he said, listen, in any European port sailors from all over the world, on shore for a few hours or days, gathered in bars. They came together in the evenings for fellowship. What did they talk about, and in which language? Some were Norwegians, one perhaps a Levantine Jew, a few Dutch, or maybe Spaniards or Americans or British. There was no common language, yet the talk flowed freely. A bottle in hand, laughter in the eyes, a fountain of words, somebody unfolding a tragic story, others listening with sympathy, whatever they said and understood was enough for the occasion, for the boisterous camaraderie of the moment!

Joyce explained that the words in his books were derived from other languages, or were influenced by them. Sometimes multiple words were combined to form one, at other times one word was split



*Binbad the Bailer and Pinbad the Pailer and Minbad the Mailer and Hinbad the Hailer and Rinbad the Railer and Dinbad the Kailer and Vinbad the Quailer and Linbad the Yailer and Xinbad the Phuailer.*

What the hell was this, I thought?

The answer (the short answer, in fact, for in Joyce, one thing ineluctably leads to another): it is the language mimicking the rhythm of steady breathing. Bloom is falling asleep. This gradual fading of his waking self is itself reflected late in the passage when the phrase loses its previous consistency of similar sounds and instead of 'Dinbad the Dailer' becomes 'Dinbad the Kailer.' Bloom's consciousness is beginning to fragment.

I can hear it today. I couldn't hear it then. And this is just one tiny part of a weave so dense and bewildering that I left the book unread.

What got me back into *Ulysses*, this time for good, was Vladimir Nabokov's (the author of *Lolita*) *Lectures on Literature*, the collection of his classroom lectures at Cornell University. He was amazingly brisk about *Ulysses*, approaching the book with a no-nonsense, school-master's air. Nabokov dis-

daigned symbols, focused instead on the physical detail and the structure. So he took his students through the streets of Dublin, even made a map of Bloom's walk, made them see the waters of the Liffey river, smell the garbage, read the labels, feel the cloth of Bloom's pants. He laid bare, in Udpik's words, 'the ticking watch.'

It galvanized me. For the first time in my life, I saw the pattern of *Ulysses*, looked at it from above, could feel Dublin, and therefore could feel Bloom. I no longer feared the book. Now I picked up the damn thing, read it from end to end. What I didn't understand, I ignored. I skipped parts. I bought guidebooks, and slowly, at leisure, feeling very much the gentleman-scholar, began to chase down all those allusions, the tics, Homeric organization, the Catholic theology, the classical references, the father-son theme, the subject of usurpation, exile, Irish history, Dublin accents, literary parodies. Et cetera, et cetera. Slowly, over time, sure as taxes, *Ulysses* came around.

*Ulysses* is everywhere. Wherever there exist writers and books. In Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*, for example, that exact moment when a break in centuries-old taboos occurs, when Ammu looks at low-caste Velutha: 'The man standing in the shade of the rubber trees with coins of sunshine dancing on his body...'

And which is a direct descendent of the line in *Ulysses* which goes: '...through the checkerwork of leaves the sun flung spangles, dancing coins...'

Its images and phrases have entered modern consciousness: the bat which is 'like a little man in a cloak he is with tiny hands.' The dairywoman: 'Crouching by a patient cow at daybreak in the lush field, a witch on a toadstool, her wrinkled fingers quick at the squirting dugs. They loved about her whom they knew, dew-silky cattle.' And of course, *Ulysses*'s most famous sentence: 'The heaven-tree of stars hung with humid night-blue fruit.'

But why read it? It is a question Martin Amis has asked: '*Ulysses* is thoroughly studied, it is exhaustively unzipped and unseamed, it is much deconstructed. But who reads (it) for the hell of it?' Practically nobody nowadays. Too much work. Which is a pity, really, because it is about

you and me, about Everyman. Joyce's hero is a very ordinary man, and in that very ordinariness are found the qualities that make for epic stuff. It should be read, not shunned, for its language, for its complicated, intricate design. For its multiple layers of meaning, for its riot of colours and shifting textures.

It should be read simply because of Bloom, one of the great characters of fiction. Here he is about to feed milk to the cat:

*The cat walked stiffly round a leg of the table with tail on high.*  
--Mkgnao!  
--O, there you are, Mr. Bloom said, turning from the fire.  
*The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writing-table. Pr. Scratch my head. Pr.*  
*Mr. Bloom watched curiously, kindly, the lithe black form. Clean to see: the gloss of her*

*sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes. He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.*  
---Milk for the pussens, he said.  
---Mrkgnao! the cat cried.

And it should be read so that should you find yourself, through the mysterious patternings of fate, in Dublin on Bloomsday, you'd know exactly what was going on. And so that you can have the mostest fun. If the centenary shindig is such a blast, can you imagine the party they are going to throw on June 16, 2022, when it's going to be the centenary of the publication of *Ulysses* itself.

And all this because of a book! Mrkgnao!

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**Bloomsday Centenary Poem In Free Verse and Prose**

**KAISER HUQ**

16 June 2004---  
Imagine!  
A hundred years since Stephen Dedalus and Leopold (Poldy) Bloom stepped out of their respective homes in Dublin...fair city where girls are so pretty...  
  
Imagine the day in another city (town rather) with the same initial---  
Dhaka.  
  
Let two of its denizens, separated  
like the Hibernian anti-heroes by age and religious heritage enact the Odyssean perambulations through fetid, waterlogged lanes, clutching dripping umbrellas--  
the monsoon having arrived with a bang---  
and tiptoeing through slush. their names...one must have a mythic ring...  
  
how about Ali Baba Sindbad, and the other, stolidly resonant...  
  
Babu Hurree Chunder Mookherjee, that extraordinary creation of the master of Anglo-Indian fusion, Ruddy Yaar Kiplingan.  
  
As for correspondence between chapters, why, 'Circe' is of course set in the old red light district of Kandu Patti; 'Scylla and Charybdis' in the Northbrook Hall Library: the subject of the impassioned debate that takes place there isn't about Shakespeare's supposed cuckoldry, as in the Dublin version, but something equally exciting, whether 'tis nobler to pursue Vaishnavite devotion, with the help of one's own spouse or someone else's. For the rest, let undergrads toil on it as a tutorial assignment, meticulously plotting Joyce's Dublin on to our tropical metropolises.  
  
Suddenly  
I am struck  
By a double-barrelled epiphany:  
Dublin is Dhaka is any city  
And Bloomsday is today is any day...  
  
Henceforth,  
The map of Dublin as in *Ulysses*  
Suffices for all cities,  
And calendars are redundant  
For everyday in Bloomsday...  
  
Hurree Babu (for you are perennial citizen of these sultry parts), kindly note: here's a suitable topic for yet another of your submissions to Notes & Queries, to be only rejected, like the others to the Royal Society, and eventually to be included in a privately printed limited edition of a definitive collection of all your unpublished adumbrations.  
  
Dhaka, Bloomsday, 2004

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\*Amiya's full name was Amiyachandra Chakraborty. First published in *Six Seasons Review*, 2002, University Press Limited, Dhaka. Translated from Amiya Chakraborty's *Shesh Probondho*, Mowla Brothers, Dhaka.