

SHORT STORY

The Benevolent One

KALAM HAIDRI (translated by Syed Azam)

I am sitting in a cheap restaurant in Zakaria Street, a cup of black bitter tea, topped by a thick crust of cream resting on a black table in front of me. There are a number of people sitting at a long table, a little away from me. One of them, wearing a black-and-white checkered lungi and a T-shirt with a zipped up front, is quite familiar to me. He comes to me every month with a request to write out a postal money order for him. The amount to be remitted ranges between forty and fifty rupees but sometimes it goes up to as much as a hundred rupees.

As I have said, I do not quite know the man. I don't know where he lives nor what he does for a living. I only know where the money goes. It goes to one Sakeena Bibi, care of Sharafat Hussain, Biri shop, Purnea.

I put the cup to my lips. The cream clings to my lips. Lowering the cup, I blow across the cream, exposing the liquor underneath it. As I take the first sip of the tea I feel a sweet-bitter line descending from my throat down to my stomach.

I guess Sakeena Bibi must be this lungi-wearing man's wife. I also know this man's name---Maula Baksh. The first time he had come to me with the money order form he had asked me to write Maula Baksh as the remitter and had then added: 'Please put down my address care of your own.' Thus though I came to know his name, I remained ignorant of his address.

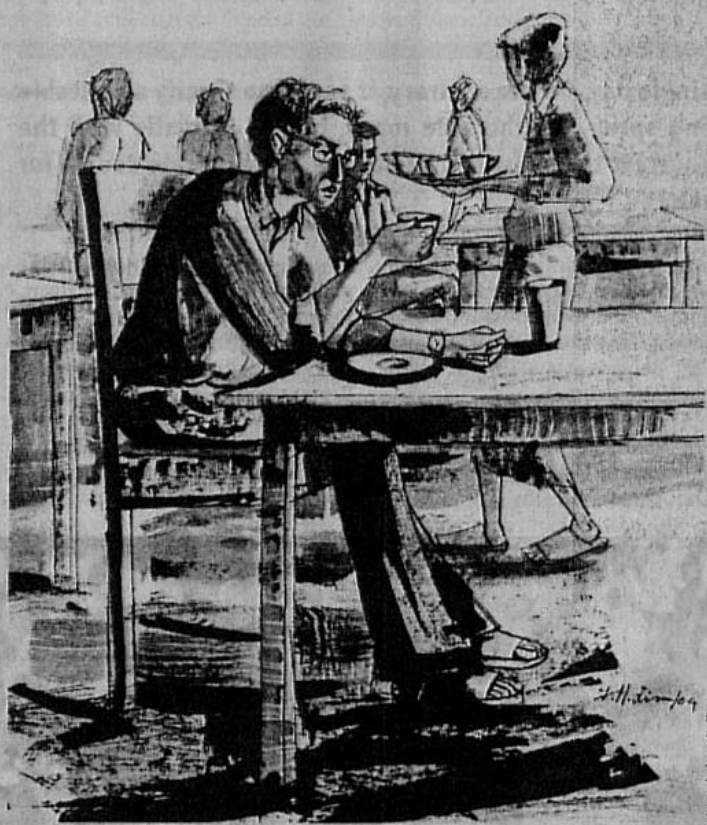
I again pick up the cup of tea and look balefully at the crust of cream which keeps coming between my lips and the liquor. I take the tea in one big gulp and then to swish it around in my mouth.

Sakeena Bibi's husband is a dark, stockily-built man, rather squat with high cheekbones. The end of one of his earlobes is missing as if it had been chopped off. He has a working man's sun-burnt, rugged face, resting on a thick neck. His eyes are bright, though there is a hint of vagueness about them. As I sit there sipping my tea two men walk in and stopping near the entrance look around as if taking stock of the restaurant. One of them is wearing a 'Delhi Cap' aslant on his head. The other man is bare-headed, his hair unkempt. They move in and occupy a table. I gulp down the last of my tea and placing the cup in the saucer push it away across the table.

The restaurant radio, which had been blaring out a film song, suddenly starts making a rasping sound. The restaurant owner, who has been sitting resting his chin on his palms and engaged in reading an Urdu newspaper, looks up startled and turns the knob of the radio.

I keep my eyes fixed on the two newcomers. The 'Delhi Cap' after a brief huddle with his companion, orders two sheer maal and two seekh kababs. The restaurant boy, who has been standing near a big hole-like opening through which one can have a good view of the kitchen, shouts out the order. Maula Baksh shifts on his haunches and looks in my direction as if he is intrigued at my lingering in the restaurant for so long. I look away to avoid his probing gaze.

Though I remain glued to my seat, my patience is fast ebbing away. I have lost hope of meeting the editor of an Urdu paper who had made me a reckless spendthrift during the past four days on the promise of getting me a job. I had thought I would ask him for some money in advance to restore my sagging prestige in these Zakaria Street restaur-



rants which I am in the habit of frequenting.

The red-crust *sheer maal* resting in front of the 'Delhi Cap' inflames my hunger. From where I sit I can see the steam rising from the *seekh kababs*. The editor has indeed let me down badly. As I sit there waiting for him my thoughts languidly turn to Sakeena Bibi, Maula Baksh's wife. What does she look like? Does she have any children? Why not catch Maula Baksh's eye and then ask him if he has any children. Then I decide that the question would be irrelevant to the circumstances in which I find myself and quickly dismiss the thought from my mind. The 'Delhi Cap' and his companion have polished off more than half of their *sheer maal* and the *kababs* no longer exude steam.

At last I give up all hope of meeting the editor. It has proved to be a futile wait. I could have as well utilized this time in hunting for potential students for some private tuitions. I feel like a complete failure. This woman, Sakeena, going by her husband's age could not be more than twenty years old. And I am sure she has no child, but who is this fellow Sharafat Hussain? A relative, a friend? Sakeena... Then I shake my head. How silly of me! Why should I be thinking of Sakeena? And this man Sharafat Hussain, why should I be concerned whether he is related to Maula Baksh or not?

I see that those two fellows have done full justice to their *sheer maal*. Oh, with what gusto they consumed it!

It is getting on to be three. I have been waiting in this restaurant since eleven. Four hours is a long time indeed. I feel physically and mentally drained out. Maul Baksh is still sitting in the restaurant. He comes to me on the 13th of every month to have his money order form written out. If at all, there is a deviation of only a day or two, this way or that. But come he must.

I am sure Sakeena is a beautiful woman. The sparkle in Maula Baksh's eyes bears testimony to that. He must be in love with her-- the hint of vagueness in his eyes possibly denote the pangs of separation from her.

I have squandered nearly five rupees in the last four days just on the strength of a vague assurance from this editor and he has let me down so badly. I am in a terrible predicament. I am left with just six and a half annas of which six paisas are on the verge of parting company with me.

I look at the cup lying before me which I had emptied a long time back. It has become an eyesore to me. It will be the cause of depriving me of six paisas which will leave exactly five annas in my pocket. How can one carry on in a city like Calcutta with a measly five annas in one's pockets, specially when one is addicted to visiting teashops in Zakaria Street?

I see Maula Baksh getting up from his seat. He throws a meaningful glance in my direction, then sidles up to me. 'I'll come to you tomorrow,' he says in an ingratiating tone. 'You'll be at home?'

So that is that, 'Tomorrow he will call at my place to make his monthly remittance to Sakeena. By tomorrow these five annas would have burnt a hole in my pocket, if they are still there.'

I am lying in my bed in my dingy hovel-like room, a two-anna coin under my pillow. I was awake the whole night and am now feeling out of sorts.

The calendar hanging on the wall flutters in the breeze and with the American girl who is getting down from the aircraft. She looks so cute, so ravishing.

I get up from my bed, a move that only accentuates my hunger. I am really feeling famished. I put the two-anna coin in my shirt pocket. Then I pull down my pants from the clothesline where I had hung them to dry.

I must go out in search of a private tuition -- something to fall back upon till I can get a regular job. Why not sell off my English dictionary? The very thought of selling the dictionary cheers me up. Then, as I look up, I find Maula Baksh standing before me holding a blank money order in his hand. I fill in the money order form--Sakeena Bibi, care of Sharafat Hussain, Biri shop, Purnea. Sixty rupees.

I lock my room and come out onto the street, Maula Baksh close on my heels. 'Jambh' he hesitates. He tells me that he is in a great hurry to report for work. He is already late. Would I please do him the great favour of tendering this money order for him at the post office?

'It's no problem,' I reply. 'A man must help his fellow human beings.' Maula Baksh is gone. My pocket feels heavy under the weight of those thirty rupees. And there is the money order form too, lying

neatly folded in the same pocket. Since the post office is not yet open, I decide to first call at a few houses in search of a tuition.

As the afternoon wears off I find myself sitting in a decent restaurant in Park Circus. The bearer has brought me *sheer maal*, *qorma* and *seekh kabab*. The *sheer maal* looks soft and inviting. It must indeed be very delicious. The editor who had kept me waiting after promising a job has long since disappeared from my mind. Now I am having a glorious time at the restaurant. Its gaiety increases as the afternoon advances. The tuition job has once again eluded me. As I sit in the restaurant I wonder what made me drift to this place. Suddenly I think of the Sakeena. She will never get that money order. Those sixty rupees are lying in my pocket. But the money order form is gone. I tore it up and consigned it to the dustbin in front of the Crown cinema hall.

I turn my attention to *sheer maal*. I dig my teeth into the *kabab*. How nice it tastes and nicer still when eaten with slices of onion....

It has become a daily practice with me to make a round of the Dalhousie Square in search of a job. My feet ache climbing up those multi-storeyed buildings. And there are so many of them. I have come to feel that there is no such thing as a job in this world.

It is again the same story this afternoon. I am standing on the foot-path resting my tired feet while the tramcars hurtle past, clanging their bells.

I am left with twenty-two rupees and odd annas in my pocket. Of course, this time there will be no money order for Sakeena. I can breeze through many difficult days with money in my pocket. Yes, I still have twenty-two rupees with me-- a lot of money indeed.

I start walking in the direction of Cooloolota Street. Walking past a building which still bears the scars of Japanese bombardment during the Second World War, I suddenly remember that I have to call at a mansion on Theatre Road to enquire about a tuition.

As I pass by the Nakhuda mosque I see a corpse lying on a stretcher outside the main gate of the mosque opening on to Zakaria Street. A young man is standing by the side of the stretcher calling out to the passers-by: 'A poor man has died. Give money for his shroud and earn merit.' I advance to have a better look at the corpse and then fall back, petrified. A zipped-up T-shirt and a cut-off earlobe!

'Maula Baksh!' I mumble the name under my breath. Before the money order could find its way to Sakeena he had found his way to God.

I enquire from the young man how the dead man happened to meet his gruesome end. 'He got crushed under a truck,' the young man tells me and then removing the sheet of cloth he shows me the mangled body.

My head reels and the Nakhuda mosque swims before my eyes. Yes, it's Maula Baksh's dead body. People throw coins at the corpse and walk on.

My hand goes into my pocket. I bring out the twenty-two rupees and odd annas, throw it on the corpse and hurry away. The young man casts a quick glance at me and then watches me intently.

I turn to look. The young man is still watching me.

Kalam Haidri is a writer/editor who has published six collections of stories in Urdu. Syed Azam is an academic/part-time translator.

Introducing South Asian Poetry In English: Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73)

KAISER HAQ

Every literate Bengali knows Michael Madhusudan Dutt as the protagonist of two cautionary tales. One is moralistic in the high Victorian mode and was first given currency by the puritanic Brahmoism that was in full surge at the time of Dutt's death. According to Nirad Chaudhuri "the movement approached Dutt's life didactically and treated it as a valuable demonstration of the evils of improvidence." Dutt, as everyone knows, was a reckless spender, and this to many enhanced his image as an eccentric romantic genius, as did his conversion to Christianity or his marriage to an English woman and involvement with an Anglo-Indian.

The other derives from Dutt's poetical career, which evolved--or rather mutated--dramatically in his mid-thirties. As a brilliant and brash youth his avowed ambition was to become a great poet in English, "Which," he wrote to his dearest friend, Gour Das Basak, "I am

HYMN

I Long sunk in Superstition's night,
By sin and Satan driven--
I saw not--care not for the light
That leads the blind to Heaven.

I sat in darkness--Reason's eye
Was shut--was closed in me--
I hasten'd to Eternity
O'er Error's dreadful sea!

But now, at length thy grace, O Lord!
Bids all around me shine:
I drink thy sweet--thy precious word--
I kneel before thy shrine!--

I've broken Affection's tenderest ties
For my blest Savio's sake--
All, all I love beneath the skies,
Lord! I for Thee forsake!

--9th February, 1843.

almost sure I shall be, if I can go to England." He was eighteen then, and hoped to travel to "England's glorious shore" within a year. Circumstances put paid to his plans, however, and when twenty years later he did set sail, his literary aims had changed hue, so to speak.

At seventeen Dutt was writing English verses of derivative precocity; by his mid-thirties he had written a fair and varied amount: wistful lyrics, serious-minded sonnets, long or longish narrative poems. A few that he sent to "Blackwood's Magazine" and "Bentley's Miscellany" were rejected, but he did publish widely in periodicals in Calcutta and Madras, and in 1849 self-published his sole book of English verse, "The Captive Ladie", which besides the long title poem included the longish "Visions of the Past". The critical response was mixed--sufficiently mixed, it seems, to hasten a revision of Dutt's literary aims. The comment of the educationist John Drinkwater Bethune--that his English education and poetic talent would be more fruitfully utilised if he were to write in his mother tongue--certainly gave him pause.

After "The Captive Ladie" Dutt wrote only a few short poems in English. But he did write two other things that were remarkable, though for very different reasons. The dramatic fragment "Rizia: Empress of Inde", published in 1850 in a Madras weekly, is the first literary work by a non-Muslim Bengali to use a Muslim protagonist; while the lecture "The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu", published in Madras in 1854, is a pointed statement, though articulated by one of the colonised, of the colonial view of the relationship of British rulers with their Hindu subjects. But through the mass of Orientalist stereotypes there resounds Dutt's passionate praise of the English language.

As it happened this was the last complete piece of original writing in English from Dutt's pen. Within a few years his love of English and western literature would be redirected to

serve his mother tongue. Already he had begun studying Sanskrit and brushing up his Bengali. The decisive change--the "mutation"--came about quite fortuitously. Dissatisfied with the Bengali plays being put on in Calcutta, Dutt remarked to his friend Gour that he could do better. To prove his point he wrote "Sermista", which was an instant success and won him generous patrons.

The Michael Dutt every Bengali knows--the author of "Meghnadbadh", the fashioner of Bengali blank verse, the first Bengali sonneteer, the witty farceur--was launched. Only his letters to friends were still in English, in a crisp epistolary style modelled on Byron's. His European sojourn, undertaken so that he could become a barrister, broadened his knowledge of western literature and deepened his commitment to his mother tongue. The sharpest statement of his revised stance occurs in a letter to Gour: "If there be anyone among us anxious to leave a name behind him, and not pass away into oblivion like a brute, let him devote himself to his mother-tongue. That is his legitimate sphere--his proper element. European scholarship is good in as much as it renders us masters of the intellectual resources of the most civilized quarters of the globe; but when we speak to the world, let us speak in our own language. Let those who feel that they have a spring of fresh thought in them, fly to their mother-tongue. Here is a bit of 'lecture' for you and the gents who fancy that they are Swarthy Macaulays and Carlyles and Thackerays! I assure you, they are nothing of the sort. I should scorn the pretensions of that man to be called 'educated' who is not master of his own language."

Ever since it has been a Bengali foible to dismiss subcontinentals who write in English by saying, "If Michael couldn't do it with consummate success it is perverse of you to even dream of attempting it." The world has changed since Dutt's days and today there are western writers who fancy that they are pale-skinned Rushdies and Walcotts and Naipauls.

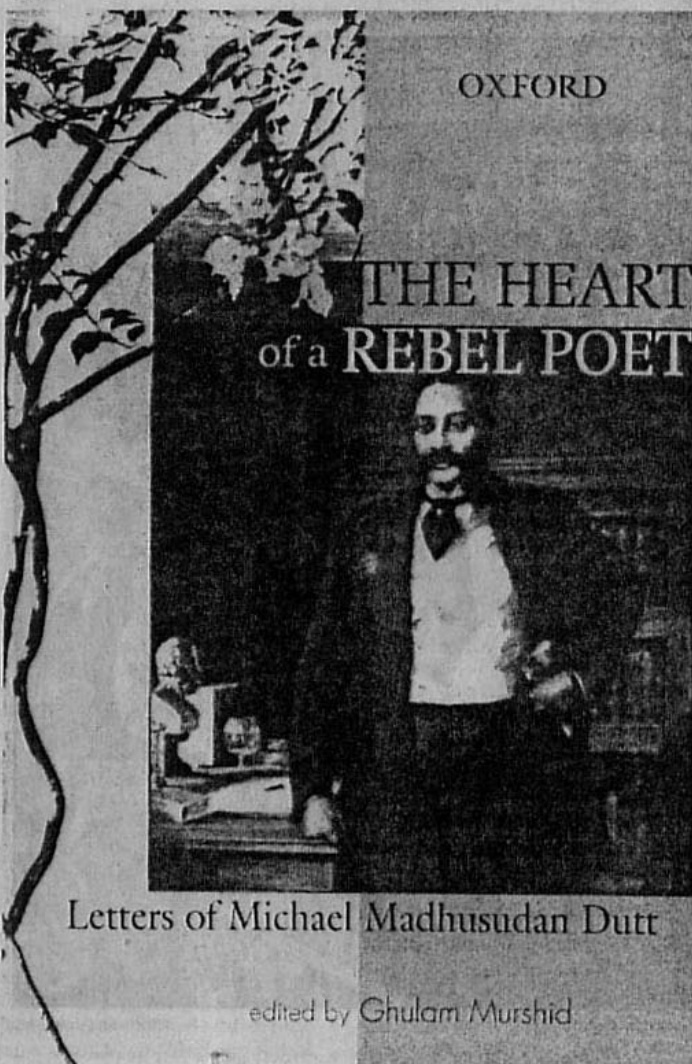
I SIGH FOR ALBION'S DISTANT SHORE

I sigh for Albion's distant shore,
Its valleys green, its mountains high;
Tho' friends, relations, I have none
In that far clime, yet, oh! I sigh
To cross the vast Atlantic wave
For glory, or a nameless grave!

My father, mother, sister, all
Do love me and I love them too,
Yet oft the tear-drops rush and fall
From my sad eyes like winter's dew.
And, oh! I sigh for Albion's strand
As is she were my native-land!

(Kidderpore, 1841)

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Book Review

The Heart of a Rebel Poet: Letters of Michael Madhusudan Dutt

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Edited by Gulam Murshid; Oxford University Press, India; 2004; xliii+ 327 pp.; Rupees 625

I have never read Michael Madhusudan Dutt's actual works, or more accurately, been able to read them. The difficulty of the Bengali he wrote got in the way. And though I kept sighing him when reading about the extraordinary historical period in which he lived and wrote, sometimes labeled as the Bengali Renaissance, with its passionate, bitter debates about religious orthodoxy and reform, he remained a distant figure. Well-known to all, sympathetic to the cause of reformers, but never in the actual fray. Perhaps it was because, as Amit Chaudhuri wrote in his essay 'Poles of recovery: from Dutt to Chaudhuri' on the construction of the Indian secular self, unlike

others who also rebelled against Hindu tradition (a Ram Mohan Roy, for e.g.) but then 'recovered' their 'Indianness' in the public sphere of religious and social reform, Dutt's 'recovery' took place in the private sphere of art and writing.

And even though his letters are in English I never even got close to them, buried as they were in the collected volumes of *Madhusudan Rachanabali*. Not any more! In this volume edited by Gulam Murshid, an ex-academic from Rajshahi University who currently works for the BBC in London, one meets face-to-face the exuberant, vividly contradictory man and artist Bengalis have been fascinated by for over a hundred years: a Hindu who converted to Christianity, the man who was his own worst enemy, somebody born to a well-to-do family but who died a pauper, a poet and playwright who scorned Bengali culture and its books and yet radically transformed its literature, warm-hearted yet one who abandoned his wife and children, someone whose very name uneasily fused together two separate, unequal worlds: 'Michael' and 'Madhusudan.'

Reading through these riveting letters, it was amazing for me to see how accomplished, in terms of pure craft, Dutt was. Beneath the occasional bluster and foppish posturing, underneath the high-spirited witticisms and the scorn for pundits he called 'beggars, pretenders and barren rascals... fetter(ed) by a servile admiration for everything Sanscrit' lay a sure grasp of technique. His casually tossed-off lines on poetic meter and measure, on blank verse and Greek hexameters, on *payar* and *jati* are fascinating to read. But mere mastery of meter alone would never have produced *Meghnadbadh*--added to the mix were an exquisite education, his beloved Milton, who provided a gorgeous Shaitan rebelling against the tyranny of heaven as a model to overthrow the traditional hierarchy of the Ramayana ('I despise Ram and his rabble' he wrote in a now-classic Dutt-ism), an absorption in Western classical literature, an

astonishing linguistic ability, and a fierce sense of revolt against a sterile obedience to the past--all these combined in him, along with that mysterious thing called genius, to accomplish a literary revolution within the short span of five creative years.

It is all there, and much more, in his letters, laid bare on these pages, in text and subtext. Gulam Murshid is eminently suited for the job of editing Dutt's letters. His biography of Dutt, *Ashar Chhalance Bhul*, (translated into English by Gopi Majumdar and published as *Lured by Hope: A Biography of Michael Madhusudan Dutt* in 2003) was hailed by reviewers as 'a landmark in Bengali literary biography' (Ketaki K. Dyson). The same qualities of meticulous scholarship and a socio-historical framework are also evident in this book. The letters are arranged according to phases in Dutt's life (under headings such as 'Young Love and the Crisis of Identity: Letters written between 1841 and 1847,' and so on), which, when read in conjunction with the accompanying biographical notes (a veritable Who's Who of Bengal at that time), and copious footnotes explaining references to everything from Greek classics to the location of Bagerhat, makes this as complete a reading

experience as any sentient reader would wish for.

My criticisms are minor. Dutt's wife Rebecca's mother's name is variously spelt as 'Kathleen,' or 'Catherine' Thompson. As is Jogindranath Basu's biography *Michael Madhusudan Datter Jibancharit*, spelt *Mikail* elsewhere. The exact differences between the titles 'barrister,' 'lawyer' and 'attorney' in 19th century Bengal is not spelt out, leading to considerable confusion as to who was the first Bengali barrister, or lawyer, or attorney--a not insignificant point in the book. There are lapses, too, in Murshid's English--descriptions of Michael as a 'poor black fellow' or 'dark-skinned native' could perhaps have been phrased differently. As could lines like 'it seems that he (Dutt) had a complex mind with many compartments.' Well, yes, if we must belabor the obvious.

But these are quibbles. Without a doubt, Gulam Murshid has rendered a service to readers of Bengali literature. Rosinka Chaudhuri reported recently in *The Hindu* that rumour has it that a whole sheaf of previously unseen letters of Dutt have been discovered. If true, then one hopes that Gulam Murshid gets to lay his hands on them.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Excerpt from Letter No. 83, written sometime after 14 June, 1861

...how you are, old boy (?) A Tragedy, a volume of Odes and one half of a real Epic poem! all in the course of one year and that year only half old! If I deserve credit for nothing else, you must allow me that I am, at least, an industrious dog. I am thinking of blazing out in prose to reduce to cinders the impudent pretensions of the 'mob of Gentlemen' who pass for great authors! Great authors! Great fiddle-sticks! But of that by and by. You may take my word for it, friend Raj, that I shall come out like a tremendous comet and no mistake. Pray, what are you doing? Where is that grand Theological Book of yours that is

to convert all manners of sinners to Brahmoism. We have just got over the noise of Mohurrum. I tell you what--if a great poet were to rise among the Mussulmans of India, he could write a magnificent Epic on the death of Hossen and his brother. He could enlist the feelings of the whole race on his behalf. We have no such subject. Would you believe it? People here grumble and say that the heart of the Poet in Meghnad is with the Rakshasas. And that is the real truth. I despise Ram and his rabble; but the idea of Ravan elevates and kindles my imagination; he was a grand fellow...