

SHORT STORY

JEELANI BANO
(translated by Jai Ratan)

It was long past midnight when someone brought the news that Amir was dead. I leapt out of my bed like a dark, raging cloud and ran out like mad. I prodded and pinched Amir's body. Was it really Amir?

Mother must have told me this story a thousand times and every time I had asked her in an agitated voice, 'Amma, Amma, what made you suspect that I was not Amir?' A fear still lurked in Amma's mind that a child once lost could never be found again. 'Yes, it could as well be some stray child passed on to me just to console me,' she would say.

Mother's remark would shake me to the very core of my being. Could it really be true? Had someone really tricked mother by palming off some other child on her? Maybe the real 'I' was still wandering somewhere in the countryside or some unknown mother was holding 'me' in her lap. But who was I? Had I really been lifted from somewhere and carried through the darkness of the night to be placed in mother's lap? Such questions assailed me from all sides till it became a real mystery. I started doubting my own existence.

As I grew up a little I decided to go in quest of this Amir whom, in a fit of forgetfulness, Mother must have left behind sleeping in a train. Once I had even gone to see the rail track. On Allah, how long the track was! It stretched on and on and did not seem to end anywhere.

When I asked Abba he just laughed. 'Silly boy! The railway line never comes to an end. It's a network covering the entire country.'

How long would the poor Amir, I often wondered, keep riding the trains? It was indeed so naive of Mother to have accepted me as her Amir without questioning. Sometimes I felt

that even Mother had some doubts about my identity.

For that matter even others would look suspiciously at me when I sat in their midst looking lost. They would call me by my name but it would fetch no response from me, as if this name did not belong to me. They were all the same amused at my antics. My elder sister would shake my head and ask: 'Where were you just now?'

'On the train, of course,' I would reply and they would start laughing.

Once Mother fell ill. Many days passed. Every night when I went in to see Mother I had a strong urge to lie down by her side but I was put off by her groans. So I would throw myself on the pile of dirty clothes and fall asleep. I really felt sore at Mother for not taking any notice of me. One night when I happened to go to her she gave me an angry look and said, 'Look at this bra! Since the day I have been ill he has not cared to come to me even once. As if he's not my son...'

I was cut to the quick and kept thinking the whole day about what she had said. Had they really cheated Mother on that dark night? Maybe I had remained unconcerned with her illness because I was not her son. My elder sister, Bhaiyya and Sabira worried over Mother all the time and looked so woe-be-gone. I but I felt that she was not really ill, that she was just putting on an act and wondered how long she would continue with this game.

Mother was annoyed with me for I was neglecting my studies and loafed about in the street. 'Can't you stay in the house even for a minute?' she would ask me testily.

So astounded was I at Mother's tantrum that the cricket ball I was holding slipped out of my hand. What did Mother mean by this jibe? Had she still a sneaking fear that one day I

would disappear and join my real family? I did not eat for two days. Mother thought I was ill. 'Why don't you go out and play?' she asked me. 'Or do your homework.'

While supervising my studies Abba used to say that if I did not understand some problem, I would do well to tackle it bit by bit. 'Spread it out thin and then attack it.'

But the question that was now tormenting me has spread out too thinly for my liking, to the point of engulfing my whole mind. At last everybody thought my brain had become addled. One of my elder sisters complained to Abba, 'Abba, Amir does not do his homework. He just sits there staring into the distance with the book open before him.'

'We never had a dolt in our family,' father replied angrily. 'If Amir has taken into his head to become a rickshaw-puller there's nothing I can do about it.'

Father had said 'in our family'. In other words, it meant Father's family as distinct from my family. The thought pained me. Now that I came to think about it, I was much fairer than Father. When I was a child and Father would cradle me in his arms, his sister used to say: 'Bhaiyya, a fair child in your lap looks quite incongruous. They would you've stolen the child.'

I would immediately get down from Father's lap. My brothers and sisters tried to keep me at arm's length. Sometimes they went into a huddle, whispering among themselves, as if they knew my story.

At night if there was a knock on the door, I would sit up in bed, looking flustered, fearing that someone had at last come to fetch me. I would wipe my nose against Mother's rough *kurtas* and start crying.

'Here, give me light!' Mother would cry. 'I must make sure that it's Amir and none else.'

They would switch on the



Illustration by Apurba

light. Holding me away from her she would scrutinize me intently. 'No, no, can a lost child ever be found?' She would resignedly place her hand on my head. 'Poor child!'

Mother suddenly woke up one night, rubbing her eyes. 'Why are you trembling?'

'Amma, Amir is frightened,' Sabira said. 'He fears someone is going to carry him off.'

'How does anyone dare to while I am here?' Mother fondled my head.

'No, I must go.' I brushed aside Mother's hand.

'Where'll you go? And with whom?' Mother asked me in

surprise. 'Where? And with whom? The whole night these questions kept ringing in my ears.'

As it is well nigh impossible to trace a lost child without somebody's help, what made it almost a superhuman task in my case was that I had to trace my own self. I had to look for myself among playing children, in running buses and speeding trains.

One day I saw a woman beating a small child as she dragged him along the road. 'Why are you so cruel, beating a child so mercilessly?' a passing woman admonished her. 'Is he

not your child?'

Somewhere a child who had been handed to an unknown woman in my place was also being beaten by that woman who was supposedly his mother. Why do women beat others' children so mercilessly? Even my own mother when she is annoyed with me almost loses her head. Perhaps she is angry with me for having come to stay in her house.

When I was lost to my mother I became two persons instead of one. One part of me belonged to Mother and the other constituted that particular child who was sitting on the berth of a railway compartment, watching the world go by in order to recognize a familiar face among those unknown persons. When will I discover the real 'I' by merging the two persons into one?

I walk up and down the balcony of my house for hours together, hoping that someone would suddenly drop out of the blue and ask me how I happened to be here. 'Go back and join your kith and kin.' But I suffer this ordeal in solitary isolation. Nobody comes to my rescue. The other 'me' must also be passing through the same ordeal adrift without any moorings. Far away from home, he must be sleeping on the berth of a train compartment which hurtles along endlessly without reaching anywhere. The black locomotive will pull the train through dark tunnels. And terrifying mountain ranges.

I often dream that I have uprooted the vast network of rail tracks, bringing the trains all over the world to a standstill. And yet that fool of a child keeps sleeping in the train. Why doesn't someone wake him up? 'Wake up, boy, run home.'

One day I came across an announcement in the newspaper: 'Athar, where are you? Return home at once. Your mother misses you. Her condition is very grave. Nobody

will reprove you.' So this advertisement was meant for me. I read it again and again, and set out in search of the given address.

I knocked on the door of the house given in the address. 'Have you lost a child?' I asked.

They looked bewildered at my torn and shabby clothes, at my bleeding feet and dust-smudged face.

'A mad boy! Keep out of his way,' a small girl struck a warning note and quickly closed the window of the house.

I turned away, utterly disappointed.

Then I saw a boy coming in my direction. He was of the same age as mine and looked sad and frightened. He gave me a quick glance as if he was trying to recognize me.

'Stop!' I said.

'Were the people in that house waiting for me?' I asked and held the announcement before him to read.

'Who are you?' he asked, looking up from the newspaper.

'They have all refused to recognize me. But I've a hunch that my near and dear ones are waiting for my return. They are sure to recognize me the moment they set their eyes on me.'

'Stop telling lies,' the young boy exploded with anger. 'This announcement is about me. I'm the prodigal returning home.' He looked at me with suspicious eyes.

'So you're the one who uprooted all the rail tracks?' I asked in a cheerful voice. 'So you've woken up from sleep at last?'

'But who are you?' he gave me an intense look.

So the whole rigmarole had started again. I stood there thinking for sometime and then jumped with joy.

'Now I know,' I said. 'You're you and I'm I,' again jumping with joy. 'We've been restored to

our respective homes.' I broke into a run, delirious with joy.

I kicked at the stones lying in my way. Stepping away just in time from racing cycles and speeding cars to avoid colliding against them and parrying the stones that were hurled at me by naughty children. I just ran on, happy in the thought that at last even those heartless children had finally recognized me.

'There goes a lunatic!' the people of the *mohalla* shouted.

You, all of them had recognized me. Now even my mother would have no difficulty in recognizing me. So 'I' at last had been found. It had been a long and frustrating journey and I had returned home dead broke with fatigue. But I could see them from a distance. They were watching me with curious eyes full of compassion and deep concern for me.

They caught me in time from falling down.

'Your son has returned!' they cried. 'Look at the state he is in!'

They pushed me into Mother's outstretched arms. 'Allah, it's indeed my Amir!'

She held my face between her hands and looked at it, puzzled. My heart was extinguished as if all joy had suddenly gone out of it. Looking disconsolate, I pushed Mother away and mumbled to myself in a listless voice that I had yet to discover who 'I' was.

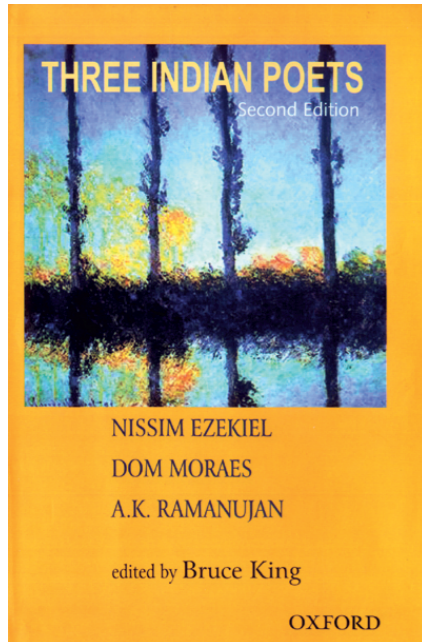
Jeelani Bano is a well-known Urdu writer and playwright. Jai Ratan has translated many Urdu and Hindi novels and short stories.

Book Reviews

Defining A Canon

KAISER HAQ

Three Indian Poets: Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Moraes. (Second Edition) By Bruce King. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 218. Rs. 395.



It is sign of the vitality of the new literatures in English that established authorities on the classic literature in the language are giving it serious attention. M. M. Mahood, well-known for her Shakespearean commentaries, has written engagingly on R. K. Narayan; William Walsh, a seventeenth century scholar, has published books on Indian English writing and on Narayan. And Bruce King, an Australian, made a name for himself as a seventeenth century scholar in American academia before taking up postcolonial literature with exemplary seriousness. He has published a book on Derek Walcott, but to us in the subcontinent his particular distinction lies in his monumental work on modern Indian poetry in English.

It is clearly a subject of continuing interest to King, for his two books on it have both been updated in their second editions. *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987; revised second edition, 2001) is the most comprehensive and critically astute survey of the subject; and the book under review, first published in 1991 and definitively augmented following the deaths of the three poets, is a complete introduction to the leading figures of the Indian English poetic canon. King seamlessly combines literary and cultural history, biography and textual analysis to produce the most valuable critical portrait of these poets.

In the case of Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) King leaves the critical chapters as they were in the first edition, and only adds some information to round off the capsule biography of the poet, who

suffered the subtle erosion of Alzheimer's disease for a full decade before his death. The reason is that his oeuvre was for all intents and purposes complete when the first edition was written: there is only one additional piece in the second edition of his *Collected Poems* (2005), edited by John Thieme.

Not so with the other two poets, both of whom, sadly, fell to cancer. The posthumously published poems of A. K. Ramanujan (1929-93) number ninety-three and have deservedly been accorded a separate chapter, as have the substantial body of poems that Dom Moraes (1938-2004) dashed off in a final blaze of creativity.

Ezekiel's position as the centre of the Indian English poetic canon, though, remains unassailable, and not only because he came before the other post-Partition poets. His robust yet flexible idiom, combining modernism and the deliberately unassuming Movement mode of the Larkin-Enright school, his unchauvinistic commitment to "My backward place", his engagement with socio-political ideas, have all contributed to his stature.

However, it is understandable that King should have more to say about Ramanujan and Moraes. The former's trilingual transactions (he either wrote in or translated into or from English, Kannada and Tamil), and subtle, ironic use of intellectual and historical material in suave vers libre lend themselves to intricate analysis; as do the existential complexities and the *douleur* underlying the lyric mythopoesis of Moraes.

If I have to raise a caveat regarding King's study it will be about the way he demarcates his historical parameters. For him modernity seems to come to Indian English poetry quite suddenly and fully fledged, with Ezekiel's first book, *A Time to Change* (1952). A historic rupture separates Post-Partition poets from their forebears. I find it historically more accurate to postulate a transition to modernity in the work of a modernist like Shahid Suhrawardy and a "Contemporary" (in Stephen Spender's sense) like Joseph Furtado. My thesis is elaborated in "Ancestral Voices: The Transition to Modernity in Indian English Poetry", forthcoming in *Transplanted Imaginary: Literature in New Climes*, edited by K. T. Sunita (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press).

I am sure King will revise and update his books again or write new ones; I hope he will take the opportunity then to extend his parameters a little further in time—and also perhaps a little in space so as to cover the subcontinent's periphery.

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Murshed's Folly

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Broken Milestones, by Manzur Murshed. Florida: Sarasota: FLF Press; 2005; 634 pp.; \$ 29.95.

The author of this novel, Manzur Murshed, is a retired senior civil servant, a former secretary and ambassador. The book seems to be self-published. FLF Press stands for Florida Literary Foundation Press, which I haven't heard of before.

The novel is about Yusuf (no surname available as far as my reading, albeit strained, went) who is born, according to the blurb, in a 'small coastal village of Bengal towards the end of the British Raj in India.' Note that 'in India.' He grows up in Calcutta, witnessing, and participating, in the horrors of the Partition riots before migrating to East Pakistan. He studies at Dhaka University and later joins the Pakistan civil service. He marries a West Pakistani woman, a Pathan princess. The great bulk of the novel's action takes place now, with a fairly varied cast of characters, ranging over rural administrative areas and Dhaka, Lahore, Karachi, Pindi. Later there is Murree, Kashmir, London and New York. The book comes to an end on December 16, with the birth of the 'new state of Bangladesh.'

Either Mr. Murshed is ignorant of the current standards of the English novel written by South Asians, or else he is an intrepid, ambitious soul who is not to be denied his moment in the sun. Armed with nothing more than the bent lance of Indian English, or perhaps a variant thereof which may be labeled as CSP English, the author has tilted it full-bore at the windmills of novel-writing to produce this 634-page tome. It is a book that exhibits with aplomb the rustic infelicities of, say, a schoolmaster in rural Bengal.

'I stand up to leave. Nasser shouts from the centre of the room, "Hey where are you going?"'

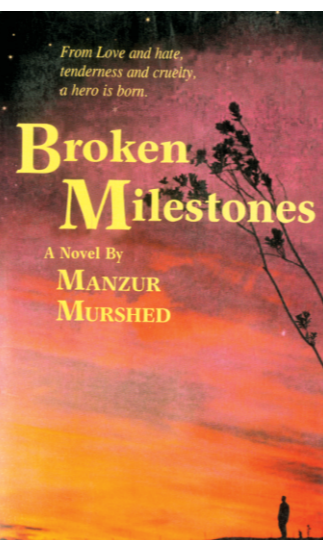
'I make the sign of minor toilet. He nods. I leave quickly and Rashidun follows.'

Sign of minor toilet! One is

left wondering if that is a coded metaphor for the book. It is, after all, six hundred and thirty-four indefatigable pages of this stuff.

The central character's life unfolds against the vast panorama of national politics, where lest we not get the point, various figures are one or two cards shy of a full deck: 'Sheikh Najib' for example, for Sheikh Mujib, or, (another favourite) 'Iftikhar Ali Sutto' for just guess who.

It is a mystery why all manner, and races, of 'scintillating' women are so smitten with Yusuf. We never know what he looks like, nor does he really do anything extraordinary to merit such attention. Yet they fling themselves at him by the bucketload. Maybe it's the



mystique of that absent surname. Maybe all he needed to be was a joint secretary. But, sadly, no matter how much they desire Yusuf, all of them meet the same sordid fate: entombment in the language of penny dreadfuls. Time and again, 'howling lust engulfs both of us, like the primordial man and woman. We are two beings that matter for the moment, time stops and transports us to that niche where human passion confluences to produce momentary pleasure.'

But all is not lost. There are nuggets to be mined here. To give just one example, if the reader is interested in anthropology, as I am, he/she will be fascinated by the passages about the recruitment interview

(viva voce) of would-be CSPs by members of the Pakistan Public Service Commission. If the rendition in the book is a fair approximation of reality, then one is forced to conclude that it was a harrowingly cavalier procedure. Two questions by the board (and then it's lunchtime and Yusuf is in like Flynn), one of which is: "But tell me, you are a student of Mathematics principally, yet you write such good English. How?"

"There is no contradiction between English and Mathematics," I say. "I like the study of both subjects. Just as I love the rationalism of Mathematics, I have also been charmed by the infinite variety of the English syntax. I think it is possible to love both."

That charm must induce mental paralysis, for concern about the syntactic validity, and aesthetics, of that interrogative, monosyllabic 'How?' simply blows through Yusuf's head like wind over empty plain..

At the end, one has to ask: is this what life in the Pakistan civil service was like? If so, it does explain certain things, not the least of which is that all those trendy theories about class and feudalism and the military-bureaucratic oligarchy being responsible for the break-up of Pakistan are just so much bunkum. Lay the blame instead on the CSP interview, and the subsequent academy training. No state, least of all the fragile formulation that was the old Pakistan, could have survived these mandarins.

If the reader is idling her/his engine on a Sunday afternoon, he/she might thumb through Murshed's Folly as a prime example of how not to write the South Asian English novel. Which is too bad, really, for if one discounts the language, there are glimmerings of an interesting read here—the author does display the sharp eye for the odd detail. But then, the tale's in the telling, isn't it?

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Life's Greatest Lesson

ZAHID AKTER

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom; New York: Doubleday; 1997; pp. 192.

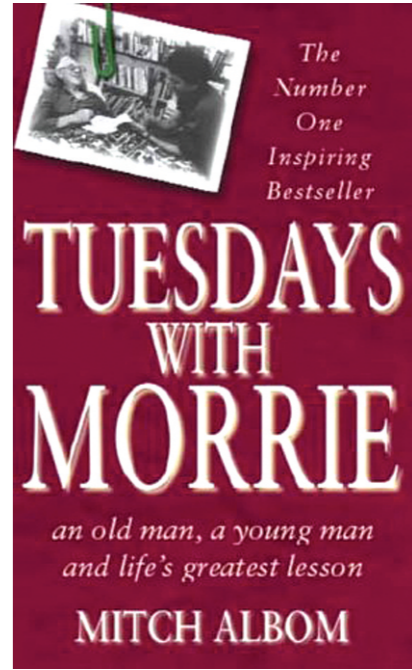
Thousands of famous books have been written about romance and family relationships and no doubt thousands more will be written. *Tuesdays with Morrie* is not one of them but it stands out in a thousand ways.

This is a story about a professor and his student. Or more precisely, about a professor as seen and also not seen by his student. Professor Morrie and his student Mitch met during Mitch's graduation days. They become friends. After graduation, Mitch promised Morrie that he would stay in touch. But as is often the case in life, Mitch drifted away.

Long after, he renews his contact with him, but the professor is now terminally ill. This story, however, is not about a poignant death, it is about an illuminating journey toward death. The whole big world of learning and thought that Morrie weaves over his imminent death turns death into a small incident. His ponderings over death, in fact, multiplies the significance of life. Death, in Morrie's view, is not an antonym of life; it is not a reverse force. Only death can truly reveal what life is and what we need to do here. Morrie says, 'It's natural to die. The fact that we make such a big hullabaloo over it is all because we don't see ourselves as part of nature. We think because we're human we're something above nature.'

When you read this book you don't need a lot of theories to understand the bane of materialism. The relentless chase and greed that materialism entails goes against the very core of our soul and we forget to stop and take a close look at life. Morrie observes that 'culture doesn't encourage you to think about such things until you're about to die. We're so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money, meeting the mortgage, getting a new car, fixing the radiator when it breaks we're involved in trillions of little acts just to keep going.' Such trillion small things even make us question the value of love. Morrie warns, 'Love each other or perish.'

The book abounds with such aphorisms. According to Morrie, if a person thought about death 'he would never do any work that exploited someone else, and he would never allow himself to make money off the sweat of others.' About our perennial problem of maintaining humility we are told, 'People are only mean when they're threatened.' For us, ageing usually means anxiety. Not for Morrie. He says, 'As you grow you learn more. If you stayed at twenty two, you'd always be as ignorant as you



were at twenty two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's also positive that you understand you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it.'

For me, the most striking fact about the book is that a teacher of Morrie's stature has to undertake such a journey to prove that he was truly a teacher. The journey is, no doubt, worth pursuing. True, Morrie's philosophy and perception of life draw exclusively on the American context. But then every revelation must have its own location, and that should not be an impediment to Morrie's relevance for us in Bangladesh. However, I do need to point out one possible discrepancy. Morrie frequently reiterates 'When you're in bed you're dead.' Here, he perhaps is cautioning us against idleness, but this is brought into question by Morrie himself, whose aphorisms about life have been thought out while lying in bed.

Only few people can write stories the way Mitch does. He doesn't waste words. Economy and temperance are superbly interwoven. And yet, amazingly the untold is more resonant. Another surprising feature of the book is it remains far from being morbid, though it deals mostly with death. Mitch is able to give a touch of serenity to every single page. Let me say it in Morrie's style, read this book or regret it.

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