

NON-FICTION

(Not) Meeting my Londoni Mama

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

Since my boyhood, I remember our family being proud of having relatives abroad. There were levels, though. Having an uncle or aunt - first or second - in Calcutta (Kolkata) was not something worthy of mentioning boastfully, while having them in New Delhi or Bombay (Mumbai) might cause someone's eyebrows to be raised high. But the best was having one in London. So my paternal aunt, at her crooked age, in Delhi, my maternal uncle, senior in age, in Mumbai now, and today's Mama, some three years older to my mother, were like people from fairy tales. Mama is seventy five now, and I then felt unworthy at not having had a chance to meet him.

During my boyhood and early teenage years, handwritten letters from my London Mama created much tumult among us - the huge number of we siblings, though that was not to last long. The letters were usually addressed to my Ma, sometimes making queries about others, but at all times crisply worded. On occasion those letters would even carry small cheques ranging from £20 to 50. That would become big news -- to us family members, our neighbours and even sometimes to the heavyweights of our village society, since that needed to be cashed through the local bank. What a pleasure, when I grew much older and had a family of my own, I was able to create an environment to share that sort of sheer joy which I found in those eyes crowding around us in those bygone days.

Sometime in the first half of 2002 (am I recalling correctly?) two bideshi (foreign) women came to our village haat of Kamarkhali in Faridpur. They were looking for someone whose name they kept pronouncing in their British accent as 'ghita'. Being whites, they drew many people around them, some of whom took them to our village home. Sorrowfully, no one was able to understand them. So they began to wander around and at last again they were directed to our house since many people knew that we had a relative living in London. All tears suddenly broke into laughter when it was discovered that those two bideshi women were in fact uttering the name of our Ma, Geeta.

I came to know the incident from a letter by my Ma. It said that two foreigners came on an NGO programme to Dhaka. After finishing their official schedules, they began their expedition to find a place that sounded something like Kamarkhali. Their local NGO colleagues suggested they try Kamarkhali, a

comparatively more known place of Kushtia. From Kamarkhali, some other clues pushed them to Kamarkhali, not a negligible distance from Kushtia, especially for foreigners. Thank God that they did not stop till they met up with a Geeta of Kamarkhali of Bangladesh. Those two foreign girls were the friends of Ajay, my Mama's son. My Ma in her letter provided me with the address of Ajay that the bideshi women had given her and thus began my own association with my Mama and my newly discovered cousin.

Soon I contacted Ajay by email that turned to phone calls also. So many things unknown about the family, so much talk to be exchanged!! So much eagerness craving inwardly! And to my utter surprise Ajay, with his little knowledge in Bangla, came to Bangladesh in October 2003, aged 33 years odd. Prior to Ajay's visit to Bangladesh, I had requested if Mama would come with Ajay. I explained that the visit would give us a chance to have a look at him. But ill health and old age did not allow Mama to travel. After Ajay's arrival we really began to learn about Mama from a firsthand source. We got to know that Mama lived in a city some 200 hundred kilometers far from London.

In Kolkata during the liberation war days we came to know that Mama had turned into a sannayashi, left all his London properties and come back to India. He had also married and had a son and ... so many things were unclear, ambiguous and mysterious!!! During the soronanthi days my Baba went to meet him at Scrcarpore. Ma, along with our second brother Shyamol, also went to meet him at Hrishikesh. All these we had dimly heard and partially remembered. Now, during these last four or five years, we began to know about him with certainty.

On 18 April 2003 (the date confirmed by the letter sent as a reply) I wrote a very long letter to my Mama I had never ever met. I wrote it deliberately to know more about him. In the letter I made many queries to him and requested him to answer those as elaborately as possible. But his reply wholly frustrated me since all I received was a tiny note with very sketchy information.

With due respect to my Mama, I want to say that the illegible handwriting and horrendously incorrect spelling created considerable confusion in me. Okay, I thought, so he had no practice of writing Bangla for a very long time, but why was Mama avoiding writing in detail? Wasn't he literate enough that he couldn't to ventilate his ideas and thoughts!!! Much later when I received his email, my doubts became a certainty: He was not an educated man. Below is what he wrote in that thin



letter in Bangla (translation mine):

"My body was born in a poor family. First my father worked as a teacher of a village school, and later on as a mohuri (an accountant) at a shop and at last as a nayeab at the Zaminder's. He married for the second time when my mother died. As he did not adopt family planning, in the next few years, he had more two sons and two daughters. My own mamabari (maternal uncle's house) was just adjacent to ours. So we would spend most of our time at our mamabari. Since he did not have any permanent income, the condition of the family of ten members including eight siblings gradually worsened.

"Completing my schooling of class 7, I went to West Bengal. At the age of 16 I joined the merchant navy training when I was in the West Bengal Volunteer Force. Later I visited many more sea ports as a sailor and at last settled in this country in 1956. During my sea days and first days in the United Kingdom I was helped by Bangladeshi Muslims, and therefore I will remain grateful to them forever.

"In the foreign lands I have been in problems as I am not much literate in English. What I learnt is to just manage the situations. The next events included getting citizenship in the UK, building the house,

buying the cars, getting married, losing one eye in an accident in the factory where I worked, suffering from asthma, selling my house and vehicles and going back to India. As every year I began to suffer severely from asthma, I decided to return to this country again."

A small note, yet poignant and pregnant with information. And truthfully speaking, this was the longest letter that I ever had from him: this mythical figure of my childhood and our family. The other letters said only hellos, wishes and nothing else. But the letters were nonetheless something precious for me: I discovered a very kind heart in them - kind to his sister (my Ma) and to his native land.

In April 2004, he wrote a letter that I should share with my readers: "Every day I watch reports of the devastating flood of Bangladesh on television and radio and get upset. Today I have sent to you £200 for the flood-affected people through Money Gram. You please do use that money as you think best." Later he gave me the necessary code numbers, etc. I handed over the amount to a relief committee. The letter also said: "I have decided to donate some money to Lohagora (his native village) College. I sent a letter to the principal but got no reply." The desire to

do something for his native land was ever present in him. In August of 2004 he wrote: "For more than 50 years I have left my birthplace, and now I am 73, as the office documents say. To date I have got no opportunity to make a donation for the welfare of my motherland." Dear readers, I felt elated that he is my mother's brother, that my Mama feels so deeply for his own land!

In July 2005 when the London bombings created huge panic in the city I got the first email from him: "I am safe and sound. Tell your mother. Learning computer and internet." Thus started the online era with Mama. On the Kali Puja, Durga Puja, Doljatra and Noboborsho he sends greetings that makes our whole family happy.

In 2006 there appeared the possibility of at last getting to meet my Mama. I was invited to attend a symposium at Mondialogo School Contest in Rome, to be held between 4-7 November. I had to collect the transit visa for the UK, as per the direction of the Mondialogo team. On the flight back, since it would be a fourteen-hour transit in London, British Airways sent me all the necessary information regarding hotel arrangements. As we had decided over email, Mama and I would get to spend the whole time together at the hotel. I would present him with the naru, amotto, patali and the other Bangladeshi village delicacies that my Ma gave me to hand over to her brother. I was elated, it would be so nice, so memorable, this getting together for a night. And so with great expectations I got down at the Heathrow Airport at 1800 hours on 7 November.

At the terminal, the British Airways people indicated the hotel location just over my heads. With breath-stopping excitement, I rushed to the immigration counter. Seeing London for the first time did not count -- the only thing flowing through my mind was the sweet thought of the forthcoming moment to meet Sanat Majumder. I would tell about him to my Ma, show her the photos, the videos, and so much more. But then the lady at the immigration counter told me that I was not allowed to go outside the airport. I was outraged: How dare she! This ugly witch! Didn't I have the transit visa! Her reply was: "Your visa is airside, not land-side."

For the first time I became aware of the distinction of the two terms and asked the why I needed a transit visa if I was not allowed to go out of the airport! With great gentleness she explained that without the transit visa I would not be allowed to board

any flight bound for the United Kingdom. My sequel question: "Millions of peoples are crossing Heathrow every day. Are all of them seeking similar transit visas?" It was only then that the mystery was unveiled: "You're from a country that is blacklisted."

All my dreams and plans were shattered with soundless pangs.

What to do then? I went to the British Airways office again but they could not help me. They said that only the people at the security could help me. I rushed over to the security staff. What a lucky man I was! They gave me the patient hearing, but explained that there was no such place in the whole airport where they could place my Mama and me even on opposite sides of a glass door. But they did not disappoint me totally. They contacted the airport lounge and requested them to make an announcement for Mr Sanat Majumder to attend to the information desk. After some half an hour a positive reply came from the other side. There was my Mama consoling me over phone though I could not control my tears. I just told Mama not to leave, as I kept alive a very slight hope about somehow being able to send the naru, amotto and patali to him. A lady at the security told that as they were allowed to carry food stuff from outside, she could try to reach those, only the food items, to my Mama. She then checked, and re-checked, all those things, took them, and went away.

I did not wait there any more. The other security people advised me to spend the night in the upstairs waiting area along with other passengers. While I was roaming around three heavy with grief that cutest lady of the security staff came to me and informed me that Mama had been overjoyed on receiving those things, though she also sadly told me that she could not bring over the many gifts that my Mama had brought for my family members. I have never ever liked any lady, acquainted for so small a time, so much!!!

After some days a package reached our home. Among the items there was a small note: "Subrata, the Bangla letters inscribed on the nice cup given by you recalls many things of my boyhood years in Bangladesh."

Suddenly I remembered the cup that I bought for Mama from a Dhaka shop that I had not been able to find in my baggage on return. Did that go with the food stuff? Then surely it reached the person it was destined for. Mistakenly or rightly so?

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher, has also set up www.bangladeshinovel.com.

On Reading Mailer in Dhaka

KHADEMUL ISLAM

So Norman Mailer is dead, giving up the ghost on November 10 at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. Aged 84.

I hadn't read him the last twenty years, with his later tomes panned by critics as being overblown. I thought he was somebody I was over with. Not true. A writer that one reads avidly when young, 'avidly' because strange ideas are being written in a strange new language, means that bits and pieces of the old stuff will keep ricocheting inside the old skull.

It was in, of all places, Delhi in April of this year that Norman Mailer burst into my head again. Where I and Kaiser Haq, poet and prof, Dhaka University, were taking a break from the speeches being made at the SAARC writers conference.



Norman Mailer with Germaine Greer at the 1971 debate in New York. Sipping tea at the India International Center cafe, listening to a woman friend talk about troubles with her organization, with different feminists at loggerheads with each other, about the difficulties inherent in teamwork of any sort, of squabbles and disagreements. It was then that Kaiser, out of the blue, responded with a small disquisition on the active presence of evil, real evil, in the universe, shaking his head from side to side like the sage of the roadside teastall of his poem. And just like that, I was back in the 1970s in Dhaka reading Norman Mailer, whose pronouncements on God and Satan warring for the cosmos I had devoured so avidly. Which now in sunny Delhi beside the Lodhi Gardens came back with a big bang! This is not the place and time to go into a detailed exposition of Mailer's unique brand of philosophy, but at its hard center was the idea that God was not something static and given, but a supreme existential Artist, at war with Satan, and at any given moment the outcome of the universe hung in balance, the pendulum's swing depending on man's actions on earth. Living then as I was in a Bangladesh teetering in the frail

margin between chaos and anarchy, his ideas exerted a seductive power.

So he's gone, eh?

Mailer was pilloried as homophobic and self-aggrandising, hated by feminists and famously labeled by Kate Millet as the primo male chauvinist pig who was a "prisoner of the virility cult." Mailer drank his head off, took drugs, was a prodigious 'womanizer', his public persona a cringe-inducing machismo, the writer who made a ludicrous run for mayor of New York, went through six marriages, stabbed his fourth wife with a knife, and while shooting his movie 'Maidstone' bit off a part of actor Rip Torn's ear. His life at times seemed pure pulp fiction and tabloid gonzo. All of it was true. But he was also something else.

uniquely American style. Not for nothing would Joan Didion later coolly observe that "it is a largely unremarked fact about Mailer that he is a great and obsessed stylist, a writer to whom the shape of the sentence is the story."

Living as I did in Dhaka through the 1974 famine, in the aftermath of the bodies after August 15, 1975, smoking cheap cigarettes amid a continuing series of coups, counter coups and curfew nights, I read him greedily. The essays in *The Presidential Papers and Advertisements for Myself*, his novels *Barbary Shore*, *The Deer Park*, *An American Dream*, *Of A Fire on the Moon*, *Why are we in Vietnam*, in articles in 'Harper's' 'Esquire' and 'Commentary' magazines, and even stray issues of the 'Village Voice' (of which he was a founder member, besides carousing with Ginsberg and Kerouac) -- all of which could be found then in Dhaka's USIS library. What would he make of Bangladesh, I would wonder, of statist discourses permeated by the nightly divinations of *ondho pirs*, of an authoritarian rule floating like gunsmoke across minarets planted in a green landscape, of betelnut-leaf oratory leading a nationalist revolution, and its subsequent brutish betrayal? I had no doubts then which side was winning the battle for the soul of the cosmos!

The irony of Mailer's literary career was that even though he aspired to write the Greatest (not simply Great) American Novel, his real gift was in writing nonfiction, in penning what came to be known as the founding document of 'The New Journalism' later attributed to Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. His greatest book, the account of the 1968 Vietnam antiwar protest march on the Pentagon was *The Armies of the Night: History as Novel, the Novel as History*, for which he won both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. It was the most complete portrait of America during the turbulent '60s. It just plain blew me away. In two lines he could pin down redneck America: the autoshop guy in a small town brute-wrestling the engine out of the back of a Volkswagen; unforgettable sketch of Robert Lowell; an account of an anti-Vietnam-war party given by Dwight McDonald and his poet wife Denise ('Dinny') Levertov; wondering what went on inside Noam Chomsky's head as the latter lay in the bunk bed above Mailer in the jailhouse; the ruefully hilarious account of how he missed hearing Martin Luther King's 'I Have A Dream' speech because he just had to take a long piss behind a bush; the Left fascism of the free speech movement at Berkeley. It was a book that displayed what critic Richard Gilman called Mailer's "brilliant wayward gifts of observation, his ravishing...honesty." The New York Times book critic Michiko Kakutani, someone not easily impressed, memorably noted Mailer's "bat-quality radar for atmosphere and mood." It was a book that completely redefined the notion of creative nonfiction, as did his later *The*

*Executioner's Song*, which I never did get to read.

I still wonder who the hell has my old, well-thumbed copy of *The Armies of the Night*. If whoever copped the book is reading this piece, bloody return it, please. No questions will be asked.

There's much to write about him. But not enough space, and for Bangladeshi readers who haven't read him at all, the above is probably more than enough. But a couple of things do need to be said. The first is about Mailer's famous 1971 'town hall debate' with lesbian activist Jill Johnson, the literary critic Diana Trilling, and the then uber hot Germaine Greer - billed as the confrontation between the man who had just written *The Prisoner of Sex* and the woman who had published the feminist bestseller *The Female Eunuch*. Legend has grown that Greer 'demolished' Mailer. But as Midge Decter, columnist for both The New York Times and editorial member of Commentary later wrote in a famous essay 'Liberating Germaine Greer', the real story of the evening was the attempted seduction of Mailer by Greer, in manner, dress and speech. That led Ms Decter to the idea that the "ur-message" of American feminist vision included the *idee fixe* "that nothing could be more tempting than the notion that no decision taken in your life for which you may harbor some regret was a decision actually taken by you for yourself." In other words, women, take a good look at yourselves! It does not absolve Mailer from his truly weird sayings on women, gays, contraception, abortion, Satan and sodomy, but it did show me - little old me in Dhaka - that things are never as obvious as they seem, or black and white, that there are ways in which the text reads the reader.

Ah, those were interesting things to read then in Bangladesh! Unshaven, slumped in a blue chair, in unwashed jeans, hair down to there!

The other fact to be said on Mailer's behalf was the unstinting support he lent to all oppressed, jailed, beaten and muzzled writers, wherever they were, from East Europe to his own America to Cuba. In this activity he invoked the wrath of the Left as well as the Right. But he kept signing petitions and speaking on their behalf, even getting elected in 1984 as president of Pen American Center, still combative, ever ready to provoke.

And now he's gone. And somewhere up there, no doubt he's already trading barbs with both Artist and anti-Artist warring for the existential soul of the cosmos!

Khademul Islam is literary editor of The Daily Star.

Flower Girl

(For Dazuke Shiraishi)

Feroz Ahmed-ud-din

One afternoon in the Red-bird farm outside Iowa city, you said you found a rare flower, seldom seen by men, flowers only in spring.

One afternoon looking at your eyes I believed what you said. In the fall of Midwest, golden and green painted the trees the sky was cleaner blue as your eyes and bronze coloured memories floated down the season of falling leaves.

We sat near each other and we talked...you took a swim in the pond in the Red-bird farm. I walked the woods-getting-dark.

As we lay together on the grass you started calling me 'little brother'. We discussed life's problems and a few solutions, laughingly we buried the world into a bowl of soup you prepared for dinner in your apartment. I made posters for your poetry reading and performance in the city. You showed me your picture in red hair...you had dyed it back to its natural colour. I tell you I have a dark-headed sister at home. You showed me your daughter's picture. I told you about my family. We exchanged poems.

One winter morning as it was snowing outside the Imperial Palace out walking in the Ginza downtown Tokyo I discovered a flower seldom seen by strangers, flowers only in the hardest of seasons where human loneliness rides the empty buses on fast motorcycles with steel helmets and dark glasses, zooms down its way to time and age and decay. The flower of friendship. Flowers once. Never withers.

Feroz Ahmed-ud-din lives in Dhaka. An ex-student of English at Dhaka University, he won prizes for his poetry during the '70s. The above is a previously unpublished poem which won the All Nations' Poetry Prize in Triton College, Illinois, in 1977.