

NON-FICTION

A 'Rat' Encounter, Or Two...

SHAHID ALAM

My de-mystification process with the 'Rat' began one afternoon during my PhD studies at Boston University in 1987. I knew the Rat's location, and made my way from the graduate student office next to Commonwealth Avenue, continued along that thoroughfare, and then past another city landmark, Kenmore Square. The walk was all of five minutes, give or take a few seconds. It was the swansong of high summer, and the heat that day was oppressive, turning my T-shirt into virtually the outer skin of my sweating self.

Oh, yes, what has that rodent-holy to some, a pest to others--got to do with this story, you might well be asking. The straight answer: nothing - unless one counted the ubiquitous rodents that must surely have infested the 'Rat'. The Rat, familiar to both its admirers and disparagers alike is the abridged form of the 'Rathskeller'. The name sounded Teutonic, and, as I was to find out later, it is. The lettering on the neon-illuminated rectangular signboard above the premises fitted in with the name. 'Rathskeller' was painted in popularly perceived 'Teutonic' style black letters against a very dark red background, which gave, particularly after evening, a menacing aura to the whole spectacle.

That afternoon, I briefly stopped to take in the signboard, looking far from scary in the bright sunlight, went down the concrete steps, pushed open the grimy entrance door and walked into the cavernous space below street level. 'Rathskeller' did justice to its own name - the word stands for a restaurant or bar usually below street level. It was, in part, a bar. I was standing inside, and in the murky light, I surveyed the scene in front of me. It appeared so squalid, empty, and different from the glitter of night inside the Rat. I thought to myself that it looked seedy, unlike the last time I was here. That was a few years earlier, when I was at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. And thereby hangs the tale I am about to relate.

A few weeks into the fall semester, fellow Fletcher-mates Carl Delfeld and Irena Choi suggested we go to the Rat. Not one to pass up on such a promising opportunity, I agreed,



Photo: Internet

and one weekend in late autumn we got into Irena's car and made our way from Medford to Commonwealth Avenue. The distance was by no means vast, but, in the late evening, fresh to Boston city from Dhaka, the drive, to me, seemed never to end. When it did, we found parking space in close proximity to our destination.

I was impressed with the lit-up 'Rathskeller' signboard; enhanced by surrounding street lights, it looked very enticing, inviting everyone to go in and enjoy its attractions. I had been made aware of what they were by my two friends, which is why I had agreed on going there. Tarry just a little while longer, and you will get to know the reason.

We walked down the same steps that I was to take several years later, paid for entry at the same entrance door, had the back of one hand marked by purple ink to certify that we were "in," and crossed over into the humungous cavern. Only, this time, we were greeted by the ear-splitting noise of blaring electric guitars, an assortment of percussion instruments, and loud vocals, all coming from hard rock music. And, then, there was the crowd, a teeming mass of mostly young men and women forming a pulsating, gyrating, swaying organism. The 'Rat' was living up to its name

and reputation, as my friends had briefed me earlier.

By now, you might have an inkling of the Rat. For several years Rathskeller had been a dive for underground hard rock musicians and aficionados. Boston has thrown up several well-known rock bands, Aerosmith and Boston being two of the more prominent ones. Hopefuls would usually begin by playing at clubs, in the expectation that they would someday be noticed by high-profile agents and record companies, and go on to become national, or, better still, international names. Fortune then would follow fame. The Rat catered to a particular variety of these hopefuls--the heavy metal type.

We were soon caught up in the mood, with yours truly puffing away at, and diminishing fairly quickly, the contents of a pack of Marlboro. Carl was going through, at a much slower pace, a pack of Carlton Lights and every once in a while letting out a moan of self-pity: "Carlton is the lowest" (in terms of tar content, as the manufacturer asserted on every packet). You see, Carl (short for Carlton) had the hots for Irena, but she was already hooked up with someone else. Irena was a non-smoker.

Then, through the smoky haze, she came up to me, a real looker, wavy blond tresses

coming down to her slim waist, blue eyes (yeah, yeah, the hackneyed stereotype), in pink (or maybe it was blue; the memory is no longer that green after all these years) turtleneck over tight blue jeans accentuating shapely legs.

"Do you know where the bathroom is?" I told her I did not. But I was not about to make her disappear from my presence.

"Why don't we ask around?"

"OK."

And we got our direction to the where the Mens and Womens were.

Then, "Would you go in with me?"

"Whoa! I went inside. Aloud, I said "What?"

"Come inside with me."

Jesus H Krist I thought.

I looked closely at her face to determine her age. By this time, a jumble of thoughts was racing through my mind, as my mind was clearing itself from the smoke and the Millers and Heinekens. She looked under the legal age.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen." My suspicion was confirmed. She did look her age. I stared at her.

"Oh, come on, I'm old enough," she persisted.

And then it dawned on me: she was stoned out of her mind. That glazed look, very pronounced even on a cursory examination, gave her away.

"Are you with anyone?"

"No, I came by myself."

"You go in by yourself. I'll wait outside."

"Give me a few minutes."

She could take all the minutes she wanted - I was not going to wait for her! I told Carl and Irena, and "The Lowest" found it hilarious, and urged me to be a sport and ride my great luck. "She likes you."

Irena, the sane one, saved my skin. "Don't, Shahid. Look, if she comes looking for you, I'll hold you tight, so she'll think we're an item."

She did, and, Hallelujah, Irena's magic worked (although, I have to admit I did feel a slight twinge at an opportunity missed!).

Then, back to the rock band performances, and my packet of Marlboro. Very soon, I found myself with an empty pack. That was not good. We had only gone a little over half an hour past midnight. I had to have more Marlboros. I was pondering over how to get one when I spotted a dude sitting on the edge of the raised platform on which the bands

(three were scheduled for that night, if I correctly recall) belted out their tunes and belted out their vocals. Glory Be, he was holding a pack of Marlboro in one hand, and a lighted cigarette in the other! My quarry was waiting to be pounced upon.

And I pounced. Or, rather, I approached him with quiet determination, and, no doubt, with a grim visage to match. The guy, slim with curly brown hair reaching below the nape of his neck, and a beard, looked up.

"Can I bum a cigarette off you?"

He did not utter a word, but stared back at me. The silent impasse seemed to go on for an eternity. I was faltering in my resolve to bum a cigarette, and getting ready to back off when he pulled one from his pack and handed it to me without a word. My "Thanks" did not elicit any response.

Without wasting much time, I lit up, took a short puff, and felt my head spin a little. I put it down to the jolt from the combined excitement of being able to bum a cigarette and smoke deprivation for an extended period. I took a longer drag, and felt myself go down on the floor. My head was spinning furiously, my mouth felt dry, my heart was racing, and I was breaking out into a sweat.

"What happened?" Carl was peering down, with Irena at his side.

"Don't know."

"You don't look well. Let's go outside." And they took hold of me, walked me outside, and set me down on top of the stairs. The crisp autumn night air quickly revived me. I told my friends what had happened. And then the probable explanation dawned on me.

"Guys, I think the stick was spiked with angel dust. No wonder he took so much time before giving me one. That stuff is expensive."

"You might be right. Want to go back in?"

"Sorry, guys. I want to go back to the dorm."

"OK, we'll go back."

I had enough adventure for one night. That was the last time I went to the Rat until that afternoon years later. I did not go back again.

Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh)

Scenes from a graphic novel

FARHAD AHMED

A graphic novel is a novel in a comic book form. Its origins lie in the United States post-World War II era of the pulp novel and the newspaper comic strip, which in turn gave rise to comic books. Today that comic book form is no longer what most older generation figures will remember it to be. From the 1960s on it came under pressure for change came from the Japanese 'manga' comic books, the increasing popularity of science fiction books and 'underground' comic cults. Graphic novels are hugely popular in Europe, with some favourite characters, even though they are American creations, far more familiar to European readers. As that change in the comic book character became pronounced, it was simply a matter of time before it incorporated the novel's themes and linear devices, with lengthy and complex storylines bound in durable formats. Today graphic novels are hugely sophisticated in terms of themes and artwork qualities, with Art Spiegelman's work on the holocaust, titled *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* receiving a special Pulitzer prize in 1992. It is increasingly starting to gain acceptance among mainstream publishers and readers as something qualitatively different from being mere comic books. In this context John Updike's words, when in 1969 he addressed the Bristol Literary Society on "the death of the novel," are much quoted: "I see no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic strip novel masterpiece." Last year a graphic novel on Che Guevara - 'Che: A Graphic Biography' by Spain Rodriguez, published by Last Gasp - appeared to much acclaim.

In India, the genre has started to take off in a modest way, with the way having been shown by Sarnath Banerjee's 2004 'Corridors', set in Delhi with characters such as Jehangir Rangoonwallah the Connaught Place bookseller, Brighu and Digital Dutta, all in a swirl of Delhi angst and 'Hakim Tartoosi's potency oil'. The book was grabbed up by Indian readers and quickly went into its second edition. Sarnath's next work, 'The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers' has not done as well, proving more difficult to access with its post-colonial spin-off and post-modern exploration of babu-dom in 18th-century Calcutta, rife with "scandals and vicious rumours." In Bangladesh, too, the graphic novel has made its appearance - in Bengali, by The Daily Star's Sharier Khan titled *Laily* - to some enthusiastic acclaim from the younger crowd, who are far more attuned to this sort of publication.



Now Penguin India has published *The Hotel At The End Of The Road* by Parismita Singh. Her work has appeared in various publications including *Time Out*, the *Sarai Reader* and *Katha Prize Stories 13*. She was shortlisted for *The Little Magazine New Writing* award in 2006. The hotel of the volume's title has Pema, who dishes up rice and pork curry to travelers who stop by for a drink and refuge from the rains. One such day, on their journey to China, Kona and Kujia, bound together by fate, stumble upon the trail of the Floating Island, the promised land of plenty. The story is told from several perspectives: Pema's story is about lost love, while her husband speaks of homesick Japanese soldiers in Manipur and the Naga hills during World War II. The Prophet takes us back to the quest for the Floating Island, leading us to the little girl's story as she sets out to fetch water and chances upon something quite unexpected...

The book's blurb tells us that Parismita's work draws upon various oral storytelling and folklore traditions, with influences ranging from Commando war comics to World War II history and Buddhist art. Looking at the illustrations that much is clear and the tale is very much in the magical realism mode, something of a convention in graphic novel, where text and artwork combines to easily produce the desired effect, which is being re-created in Indian terms as Indians take up working in this genre. The blurb further goes on to mention that it marks "a new height" in graphic fiction writing in India. That, though, is for both graphic novel aficionados and general readers to decide.

Farhad Ahmed is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star literature page.

Kali O Kolom Jaishtha 1416 -- May 2009

KHOKON IMAM

Football fans will know what I'm talking about when I say that sometimes even a much anticipated Chelsea versus Manchester United match in the English Premier League can turn out to be a rather unexciting encounter, with ordinary dribbling and passing that is only enlivened momentarily with flashes of genuine footwork. So too with this issue of *Kali O Kolom*, where genuine inspiration lurks amid the mass of plodding literary essays. It is not the themes that are at fault here since they range from Rabindranath to eminent historian/archeologist Hassan Dani and poetry written during the 1960s to communal disharmony. Rather, it's the style of writing, which leads one to suspect that perhaps the magazine should be aware that 'literary' writing, like all other types of activities, too can fall into a rut. It is also a truism that serious essays for publication in literary journals that also aspire to popular readership can be difficult to produce on a consistent basis and that standard publications being brought out over the long term with deadlines to meet can mean that at times the match-up does not live up to its expectations - a sentiment that I'm fairly sure the editor of this particular page will also agree with! It is a fate that only the irregularly published little magazines can avoid, who can afford to wait until they have enough material they deem worthy of publication. And even then...

To give an example of the above, the essays on Rabindranath in this issue of *Kali O Kolom* are rather run-of-the-mill academic work. In fact, one of them - *Gadyakabita*, Punoshcho O Rabindranath by Amor Roy - actually contains the following sentence in its very fourth paragraph: "*Rabindranath er ontordrishti* (introspection) *boro beshi*" - which is somewhat akin to stating solemnly that the Indian Ocean has a lot of water in it. It raises the level of hack work on Rabindranath to new heights. Or lowers it, depending on one's viewpoint, to new depths. The article on the poetry of the 1960s is another example - not that it is not competently written, but it is a topic that has been written about to death, with nothing

genuinely original being played out of it anymore. Like works on Nazrul, on whom I at least have yet to read any genuinely original writing over the last five years.

Among the flashes of inspired dribbling are a short story, 'Piri' by Pranto Polish, which rudely jerks, as art sometimes ought to, the comfortably placed middle-class reader of *Kali O Kolom* into the gritty reality of life in the other lower social stratas. A piece on Hassan Dani (the celebrated Kashmir-born archeologist who put into operation the refurbishing of the Varandra Museum in Rajshahi and taught at Dhaka University through the 1950s before



emigrating and settling in the then West Pakistan) by Rokaiya Khatun Rekha 'Uncle Dani, Aami Jemon Dekhechi' is delightful. The in-memoriam on Naresh Guha is informative, but by concentrating solely on his poetry, fails to take into account, in my opinion, the utterly fresh mode of writing he brought to Bengali critical appreciations. One example is the article he wrote on Jibananda Das and

reprinted in Abdul Mannan Syed's masterfully edited *Kobita Shomogro: Jibananda Das*. In it can be found Naresh Guha's sharp eye for detail, where he typically was the first to note while cataloguing Das's deep immersion in Bengal's natural world that there was something missing. While Das, Guha wrote, did not tire of writing on fields and grain, on fields of grain ("dhaan er golpo boltoy taar klanti nai...") strangely enough in his poems one could hardly find any flowers or fruits ("phul nai... phol achay, tao shamanno...").

There are two articles, one on the African writer Achebe, and the other a valiant revisionist attempt to set straight the Orientalist bias of British historians of Oudh's Nawab Wajed Ali Shah, but both pieces are too heavily dependent on books published in English to be of any real surprise to those readers who can access them in the original. Of note are the poems 'Holud Pata'r Krondone' by Suhita Sultana and 'Jarul Street' by Mustofa Tariqul Islam. There are the usual collections of art reviews, among which is one on Rokeya Sultana's solo show in Kolkata by Debabrata Chakravarty, illuminating the gratifying, welcome and warm turn in cultural relations between the two Bengals ever since the BNP-Jamaat coalition was decisively rejected at the polls. One hopes that in the next five years the relations will be cemented to a point where no regressive cultural attitudes will ever be allowed to be affected by state or party policies and attitudes. That newer forms of the old Mohunbagan-East Bengal matches can take place within an overall frame of courtesy, amity and mutual respect. It is to Bengal Foundation's credit that they are playing such a positive role in the renewal of ancient ties.

The cover painting 'Untitled' is an oil by celebrated Bangladeshi artist Mohammed Kibria, who can be said to have given birth to modernism in this country's art. Born on January 1, 1929, in Birbhum in West Bengal, Kibria graduated from Calcutta Art College in 1950, with his meditative brooding on colour as form in its own right being a lifelong one.

Khokon Imam works at an NGO in Dhaka.

Unfinished

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

I am done. But Only partly. It isn't too pert I hope to Go back and revise The opening statement, Work over the rationale And shshsh the hysteria Of everything beginning to look untangled... It is pert of course, and to make it worse the trouble is that I am starting to believe I am all done.



Masks

RUBANA

Masks of many moulds Rotting in the newly serviced temperature level of the old air conditioning units She wears the mask from her forgotten drawer It itches, burns and finally bites her Stuck on her surrendering skin The old herbs turn violent Her layers flake off in a rush Burnt and bitter She thumps and thuds, Huffs and puffs Price paid, for diluting dead years Into the new potion of newer pretenses. The whole world looks away.

Rubana is studying for a PhD at Jadavpur University.



artwork by sabyasachi hazra