

NON-FICTION

# Jinnah Coat\*

ZEENAT KHAN

Sixteen years ago, I went to bid my father farewell. He sat on a leather recliner on the veranda of our ancestral village home in Ghorasal, on the outskirts of Dhaka. He held onto my hand very tightly. We have the same hands, father and daughter, hands that many found hard to tell apart. At that moment, it seemed our two hands intertwined as if they belonged to the same person. After a while, he let go, and I was sure it would be for the very last time.

This year marks the fourteenth year since my father passed away. He was a lean, tall man who commanded respect. My father, in fact, looked much like Mohammad Ali Jinnah in his pin-striped sherwani, his Jinnah coat, which was his formal attire. (He shunned Western clothes in support of Gandhi's non-violence movement.) He was an educator, and his coat gave him an added air of composure and grace. He was a person of rigidity and lived his life with extreme discipline. Young and old alike were fearful of him because he did not hesitate to speak his mind.

My lasting image of him is of how he looked as he prepared ritually for his Jumma prayer. The barber would show up to groom him in the morning. After bathing, he would wear a simple, crisp pajama-and-punjab set, and with a dab of attar he would be on his way, with long steps, towards the village mosque. When he returned, we would all gather for a grand Friday mid-day meal. We could never relax, however, knowing at any minute Baba would lob a question about geography or a math problem our way as we ate. We would hurriedly finish our meals, just to avoid the embarrassment of being caught out at not knowing the correct answer. Our time spent with my father was never in vain. He taught us how to read the Qu'ran in Arabic, and he taught me multiplication, even though we had three live-in tutors and another Hindu teacher, the very best at the time, who would come in the morning from another village just to teach us children arithmetic. Baba taught me, painstakingly, to read the time from an old grandfather clock that chimed in our main house. The clock face had Roman numerals and I had a lot of difficulty. Yet, he didn't give up. He would ask me to tell him what time of the day it was, calling on me at the most unexpected moments, as when engrossed



with my sisters arranging a putuler wedding.

He was a product of English education at a time when most people in his generation did not go beyond high school. Most lived on their family assets, on the yearly revenues from the peasants who worked on their lands as sharecroppers. He left Ghorasal at age twelve to attend the Dhaka Muslim high school. His father, my grandfather, a well-known pundit in his own time, versed in Arabic, Farsi and Sanskrit, saw the need for an English education. With a heavy heart, despite my grandmother's hysterical weeping, my grandfather packed up his only son and took him to his maternal aunt's house in old Dhaka. Later my father attended the then newly built Dacca University, and matriculated with the second batch of university graduates, with an M.A. in Economics, and then went on to obtain a law degree. His official title was M.A.B.L.

Instead of practicing law he took a job with the government and moved to Calcutta with

my mother and three young children. The conditions in which Muslim families lived in Calcutta then were not ideal. The small flats were cramped and my mother was becoming anemic from staying indoors without any sunlight. Moreover, my father's lungs were also giving out; he used to chain-smoke. After consultations with doctors, my parents decided that a country life would suit them best. They returned to Ghorasal and had to re-adjust to the village life that they had left.

My father became an educator. He devoted his entire life to rebuilding the primary school that my grandfather had built, and worked tirelessly to see that Ghorasal High School got its accreditation from the school board. He was the headmaster, and his children, students, and teachers all knew him as such. When I was in grade school, I would watch him pace the halls of the school to ensure the teachers were performing well. At the school he drew a nominal salary so that he could hire other qualified teachers who were hard to find for a village school. He lured Kumud Babu, a well-known teacher, from another school by offering him a higher salary than his own. (As an only son, my father inherited all that his parents owned, and his large family survived on that additional income.)

Education was, in Baba's eyes, undoubtedly the pass to a greater life. He sent his eldest son to high school in Calcutta, the second son to the Air Force Academy in Sargodha in the then West Pakistan, his third to Ghorasal High School, and the youngest was dispatched to Faujdarhat Cadet College. Progressive-minded for his time, he was a believer in equal education irrespective of gender. So the idyllic time with my parents was short-lived; as soon as I turned twelve I was shipped off to Dhaka to attend an all-girls' school, soon followed by my younger sister. My transition to the city school was smooth because of my home's nurturing

environment - though while there, I would eagerly wait for the long school vacations and often went home the same day taking the train. We were made acutely aware that we were meant for a life outside of the village: a 'modern' life.

My father loved all his eight children without having a favorite. The way he raised us can be best described as 'no-nonsense.' He never gave us any illusions about the life that lay ahead for each one of us. Today I draw strength from his teaching. Then I was a mischievous child who loved reading fiction. Often I would get caught reading a novel right before my annual exams, and my father would lecture me on the 'evils' of novel reading. He believed education was synonymous with text book reading. Sometimes, though, he would show his playful side, as when he would play a rambunctious game of *ludu* with us.

Baba was an early riser and at dawn, after prayers, he took his morning walk. After coming back into the house he would lift our mosquito net to sit at the edge of the bed, where we three sisters were snuggled up with our mother, and tell us stories. He recounted how it was for his generation, growing up in an East Bengal within the stifling ethos of the caste system. He also told us captivating Quranic parables which he knew from heart, and finish by asking us to tell him the moral of that story. Often we didn't know, and patiently he would explain.

Baba lost a five-year old son before I was born. He was a special child with severe joint problems. When my father told us about this lost brother, he only emphasized the positives: What a good-looking, bright child he was, and how he loved picture books. He told us the boy was about to have an operation at age nine, and how he was going to get better. When my brother passed away, my father was in a place named Raipur. When he missed the connecting train, he bi-cycled the rest of the way home to see his son one last time. His story about the great Bengal Famine (1943) will forever haunt me: My parents were having their mid-day meal. A beggar woman came in with three or four skeletal children to ask for food. It was obvious from their condition that none had eaten a full meal in days. So they were offered food, and as soon as the children started to eat, their mother pushed them aside and ate up every bit of

food herself. The pain of hunger was so severe that instead of letting her children eat first, she ate it all. Because my late older sister used to tell me stories about the glories of Calcutta life, I have harboured a life-long fascination for pre-Partition Calcutta. I would press my father for the tale of how he saw Jawaharlal Nehru whipped by a lash on his forehead during a rally he was addressing. A British sergeant rode in on his horse and started to whip the crowd indiscriminately. Nehru got a direct hit of the whip, and his coat was covered with his blood. I was proud that my dad was in that rally and witnessed a part of history.

When he passed away, my father received a lot of recognition in death. During the *shokshava* (or wake), hundreds of people from all the adjoining villages and all his former students who heard about it came to the gathering from across the country. I could not be there, but heard about it from my other siblings who were. Everybody who at one point had benefited from his generosity stepped forward to speak. My older sister also spoke at that *shokshava*, her first public speaking experience. With my four brothers standing next to her, she addressed the crowd and talked candidly of him as a father. If Baba was looking down from up above, he would probably have disapproved, for he was not much of a man for ceremonies.

My father has passed on, but his name remains with the ones who are living now. One of my brothers ensured that what my father represented lives on through the education of Ghorasal's children. He had the entire school rebuilt in the last thirteen years, furnished with all modern amenities: Science lab, computers, and yes, lots of books, at the new library that bears his name. The school students now wear uniforms, and there are living quarters for the teachers. There is a newly built bungalow for the headmaster to reside with his family.

A life-sized portrait of my father hangs in the school library. In it, he sits with his Jinnah coat on. On the anniversary of his death, the Bangladeshi flag flies half mast in the gentle breeze from the adjoining Sitalakhya river.

\* The above piece was written as a Father's Day tribute - Father's Day is on June 21.  
Zeenaat Khan, after three decades in America, finds writing to be a most liberating experience.

## The Other Borges

NORMAN THOMAS DI GIOVANNI

Only a few weeks ago, I caught a programme on BBC's Radio 4 in which Borges's recorded voice told the world that when he and I sat down to translate his stories and poems we did not regard what we were doing as work but rather as fun. That must have been in 1970 or 1971. And he was right. Our work together was fun; he made it so. There was nothing stodgy about Jorge Luis Borges, nothing formidable or forbidding. He knew his work was a cosmic game and he never wanted to be seen taking it or himself too seriously.

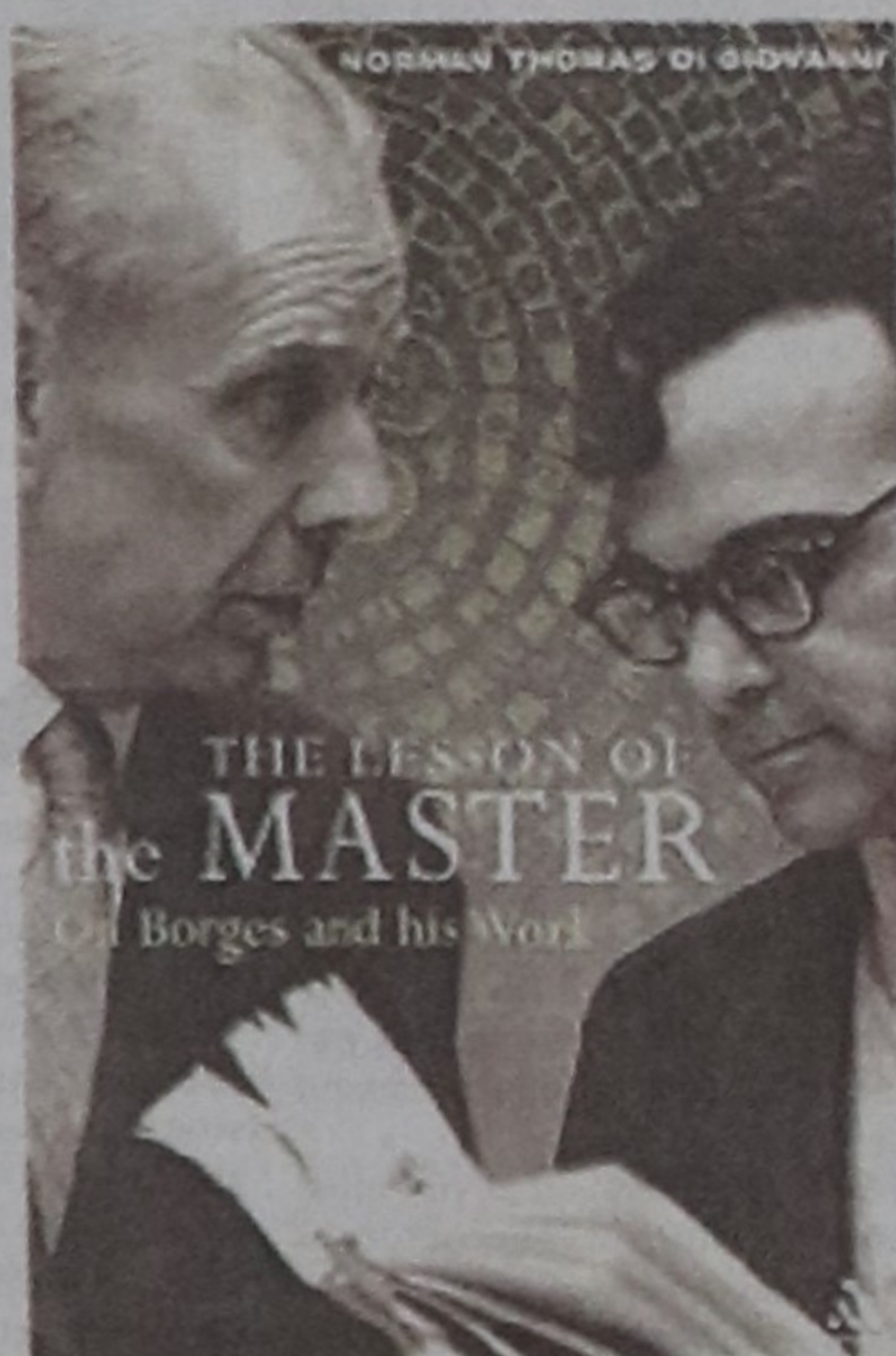
That, of course, was the public persona, and while it was perfectly true it was far from the whole story. Behind this man was the buttoned-up Borges no one ever glimpsed, the Borges he never allowed anyone to glimpse. But you do not work with a man day in and day out for years, in his native city, in his home, befriended by his family and his closest friends, often travelling with him on journeys halfway round the world, without getting to see behind the protective wall that - in Borges's case - he has erected round himself and that keeps the private man in stultifying isolation.

Borges's cocoon was a complicated affair, made up in part of his ancestry, which imbued him with English reserve and undemonstrativeness and what I can only surmise was a fear of displaying emotion. But another part of it can be attributed to his studies in Indian philosophy, Hindu and Buddhist, certain precepts of which he adopted in order to seal off his demons. One of those demons was self-disgust with an ageing and decaying body. Another was the fact of the mortifying failure he experienced in his sexual relations with women, which of course resulted in total suppression. What Borges made himself believe was that the world is an illusion.

Looking back now - not on the work but on the private experiences that circumstance forced me to share with Borges - I see a desperately lonely and desperately sad man. The late marriage to Elsa\* was a demeaning experience, and its break-up utterly humiliating. One day, shortly after his separation, Borges asked me to accompany him to the bank to check how much money was in their joint account. I stood beside him at the teller's window. The clerk said there was no money in the account. So stricken was Borges with the news that he began to slip to the floor, and I had to prop him up. Then all the way back to his flat, he kept repeating that it could not be, that there had to be some mistake. It turned out that as soon as we left the bank that day, the teller

phoned Elsa to report that Borges had been there making inquiries. Full of glee, the vengeful wife threw it in his face that he had not been able to locate the money. In fact, she had transferred it to a new account in the same bank in her sole name.

We made our getaway out of Buenos Aires on the morning his lawyers and a crew of removal men went around to the marital flat to retrieve the only possessions that mattered to him - his books. Hidden away in another town, we had to buy Borges some new clothes, a suit, a pair of pajamas. When we'd done so, the clerk asked me what we wanted to do with Borges's old suit. I told him to wrap it up and we'd take it with us. Without a word he held the trousers up to the light and wiggled his finger in a hole in the seat that was the size of a two-pound coin. This was the way Elsa sent the poor man out into the street to his job at the National Library. Yet had he known he would not have lowered himself to grumble or complain. And this defenselessness, this trait of humility and resignation in him, I found cruelly sad.



Sometimes the responsibility he placed on me was unnerving. In London, in 1971, during a fortnight's stay in the maze and warren of Brown's Hotel, Borges asked me to lock him into his room at night and take the key away with me. Before I left him I would lay out his next day's clothes at the foot of his bed, and the following morning, on entering his room, draw his bath for him. There was something touching and childlike about his trust.

He never asked me to do anything for him except occasionally to read him a story by Kipling or Stevenson. So if something needed doing - a letter answered, someone spoken to on his behalf to get him out of something he did not want to do or into something he did want - I volunteered. There was an

un-worldliness about him that was not calculated. I remember in his final years when we were at work together on some of his last poems, the moment I entered his flat he would ask straightaway if I were free for dinner that evening. I invariably was. But I could see at once, with the question settled, that he would relax and enjoy the task ahead, because the problem of a yawning, empty night alone had been resolved.

As I look back now, twenty-three years after his death, I see - or think I see - that to Borges the poet and storyteller I was both a colleague and a collaborator. But to the other Borges, who in my memories sits alone in arid darkness waiting for someone to come, I was a friend.

Norman Thomas di Giovanni was the world-famous Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges's translator and amanuensis from the late 1960s till the 1980s. His book about his time with Borges titled *The Lesson of the Master: On Borges and His Work* is being re-issued this autumn. He currently lives in Southampton, UK. Giovanni came to Dhaka recently to attend a conference and gave seminar lectures at Jahangirnagar and Dhaka universities.

## On Jibanananda's *maalay, malay, and malayali*

KAISER HAQ

The author of this book (*Barisal and Beyond: Essays on Bangla Literature*; New Delhi: Chronicle Books; 2008) is the protagonist of a charming inter-cultural romance. Clinton Seely is one of fewer than a handful of living Westerners who fortuitously fell in love with Bengali literature and made a distinguished career of teaching it - at the University of Chicago in his case. A major in Botany from Stanford, he volunteered for the Peace Corps and spent a year and nine months (1963-65) training high school science teachers in Barisal, in present-day Bangladesh. In the process he picked up Bangla (or Bengali) and, through the desultory chitchat that Bengalis call *adda*, gathered some idea about the greatest writer in the language, Rabindranath Tagore. At the end of his stint he enrolled for a PhD at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilisations, University of Chicago and discovered Bengal's greatest modern poet, whose hometown was his familiar Barisal. His thesis, published as *A Poet Apart: A Literary Biography of the Bengali Poet Jibanananda Das (1889-1954)*, won him West Bengal's most prestigious literary award. His other publications include three translated volumes, of which the one of Michael Madhusudan Datta's epic, *The Slaying of Meghnada: A Ramayana from Colonial Bengal*, got him the A.K. Ramanujan Book Prize for Translation.

The present volume is a mixed bag of essays and lectures covering a number of significant aspects of Bengali literature. Though the focus is predominantly on modern or post-Plassey literature, Seely's grasp of the earlier traditions of Bengali writing is palpable in several essays. His use of the earlier writings serves a salutary purpose, bringing out the organic connections between them and modern Bengali literature and thus effectively countervailing the thesis of loyal colonial subjects like the late Nirad Chaudhuri that the latter is thoroughly Western in sensibility. 'Say It with Structure: Tagore and *Mangal Kavya*' analyses the parallels between the play 'Land of the Cards' and the conventions of the medieval *mangal kavya* genre. Of the four essays dealing with Michael Madhusudan Datta, one comprehensively reveals the 'Indian Sources of Inspiration' behind his magnum opus, the epic *Meghnadbadh Kavya*; the critical view for long had been that Michael was a 'European' poet who wrote in Bengali. Two essays on Jibanananda Das go for intriguing hair-splitting, though the one on the correct geographic location of *maalay*, which features in Das's best-known poem, 'Banalata Sen', as well as another poem, 'Nirankus', leaves me unconvinced.

The generally accepted rendering of *maalay* is that it refers to Malaya. This is how Seely himself rendered it the first time he translated the two poems. The



poet himself in his English translation of 'Banalata Sen' renders the phrase *maalay sagare* as 'to/ The seas of Malaya'. But Seely has second thoughts, prompted by a reader's comments, which he has followed up with an examination of dictionaries and atlases. Confusingly, *maalay* can be the adjectival form of *malay*, which can refer to the Malabar region. Seely decides to revise his translations accordingly, for two main reasons. First, if *maalay sagare* is retranslated as 'to seas up the Malabar Coast', all the geographical references in the poem are contained in India as it was at the time of composition, thereby making it 'a strongly nationalistic poem.' Second, in the poem 'Nirankus' there is an anonymous *malayali*, a word we do not find in Bengali dictionaries but is clearly best rendered as Malayali, a word widely used in India to refer to a speaker of Malayalam, the language of the Malabar Coast. Seely therefore retranslates the poem, changing 'the Malayan coast' to 'On the coast along the Western Ghats'.

I find the reasoning quite spurious. Das was never strongly nationalistic - his sense of rootedness applied to undivided Bengal rather than India as a whole - and it is difficult to see why he should wish to limit the peregrinations of the speaker in 'Banalata Sen' to India, especially when the opening line describes him as 'roaming the paths of this earth' (Seely's translation). More importantly, it is absurd to think that by 'Malaya' in his own translation, Jibanananda - a college lecturer in English - could have meant 'Malabar'. As for 'Nirankus', I agree that 'Malayali' and not 'Malayan' is the correct rendering of *malayali*, but that does not mean we have to shift the locale from Malaya to Malabar. There have long been sizeable numbers of economic migrants from Malabar in Malaya, and Das, exiled from his native East Bengal could, I imagine, readily empathise with the Malayali exile as he cast an anguished gaze over the desert of the sea. As for the uprising mentioned in the

third stanza as having taken place in the late nineteenth century, it could refer to troubles in the Malay region, of which there were scattered instances, rather than anachronistically to the Malabar rebellion of 1921 as Seely suggests.

'Viewing Bangla Literature', a brief but beguiling essay, provides hints rather than an argument, and would have benefited from a fleshing out. Contrasting the Indian concept of a 'darshan' and the 'gaze' much talked about in contemporary theory - the power relations are reversed from one to the other - Seely moves on to sum up Said's thesis in *Orientalism*, and then provides examples from the works of Shamsur Rahman, Jibanananda Das and Shaheed Quaderi of Bengali poets subjecting their own culture to a voyeuristic gaze. Finally, facing up to his own problematic situation as a foreign scholar-critic *vis-à-vis* Bengali literature, he endorses an Indian critic's judgment calling for the cultivation of 'cultural inwardness.'

A Muslim Voice in Modern Bangla Literature: Mir Mosharrat Hosain deals comprehensively with the only noteworthy Muslim writer belonging to the period of the Bengal Renaissance. His *Bishad Sindhu* ('The Sea of Sorrows') is a novel of epic proportions dealing with the martyrdom of the two grandsons of Prophet Muhammad at the battle of Karbala, and raises interesting critical questions regarding genre and diction. Seely also shows how the literary career of Hosain (1848-1912) registered the increasingly uneasy relations between the Hindu and Muslim communities.

'Translating Between Media' is a sensitive comparative study of Tagore's story 'Nastanir' ('The Fouled Nest') and Satyajit Ray's cinematic translation, 'Charulata'. The essay on 'Raja Pratapaditya, Problematic Hero' ranges over a wide range of texts including the Bharatchandra's *Anandamangal*, an examination of which in the light of Propp's morphology of folk tales is also the opening piece of the collection. The penultimate essay is the weakest, in my view at least - 'Serious Sahitya: The Prose Fiction of Bangladesh's Rizia Rahman' does not rise above plot summaries and unsurprisingly fails to provide evidence of the 'richness' it claims for its subject. The 'Epilogue - Comings and Goings: From Madhusudan to the Diaspora of Today', with its juxtapositions of traveling and stay-at-home Bengalis, Michael Tagore, Jibanananda, Syed Shamsul Huq, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, is a coda appropriate to our particular moment in cultural history.

Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University. His *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006* is available in city bookstores.

\* Referring to Elsa Astete Millan, a woman Borges married in 1967 after first meeting her in the 1920s. After the 1970 flight from the marriage alluded to in the article and subsequent separation, Borges married his long-time secretary Maria Kodama in 1986, eight weeks before his death in Geneva.