

## NON-FICTION

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

When I discovered Savitry Roy it was like finding hidden treasure. Most readers of Bangla language fiction will be unacquainted with the writer or her work. But, to me, she is one of the major authors to have written on the *Tebhaga* movement, the great historical and social event in the bygone chronicle of a Bengal that included both present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal.

I first came upon her writing quite a while back, in 1992, when I was on a visit to Shariatpur, a not very well-known district of the country. But I am sure people who are well-acquainted with Bangla literature would recall the honest literary activist Rathindrakanta Ghotokchowdhury in connection with Shariatpur i.e. Palong. While there, I decided to take a look at Ghotokchowdhury's zamindarbari. While wandering around inside the homestead of this now deceased literary figure I found an elaborate almirah with a big collection of books. In there a series of books caught my eye, among which I saw that the writer's name was Savitry Roy, who was unknown to me then. The books aroused curiosity in me - so many books written by her but I knew nothing about her!

Later on the following year, in 1993, I got hold of an issue of the West Bengal gentlemen's literary magazine *Choturango* (8 December 1992), founded by Humayun Kabir and Ataur Rahman. Inside it was a review on Savitry Roy's novel *Swarolipi*, a small piece, but enough to develop a further curiosity in me.

I started to browse through the Bangla Academy *Choritaividhan*, published in 1985, but was frustrated to find nothing there. Later on, searching through *Sangsad Bangali Choritaividhan*, (the first volume published in 1976, revised 3rd edition 1994) published from Kolkata, I found an entry on her.



artwork by apurba kanit das

Afterwards, I hunted through the Public Library at Shabbagh but found nothing of value. As a Bangla Academy member I had access to their library and tried there also. Where, among a huge heap of books, was one of her books, but only the second volume of her epic novel *Paka Dhaner Gaan*.

The novel is simply written both in terms of narration and plot. But it deserved credit, I thought, for its content. The plot is set in Bangla social landscape of the 1940s, but what was of great interest was that such a novel had been produced by a woman writer. Women writing in our country, particularly in those bygone decades, are mostly about household affairs. The presence of revolution or social conflicts or acute observation of critical psychological phenomena were almost absent

from their works. Today, Mahashweta Devi's name will possibly top any list of women writers who tackle socio-political issues, but were there any predecessors of Mahashweta? With this question in mind, I began to search deeper to see if Savitry had been one.

I talked with M A Aziz Mia, a senior professor at Shariatpur College. A long-time cultural activist, I had known Aziz Bhai for a long time, though being much junior to him I would always keep my distance from this knowledgeable person. Even though he was a teacher of science his enthusiasm for literature is far greater than many literary people. I dared to write a letter to Aziz Bhai with some requests which would cost him time, money and patience, but in less than a month's time a big package reached my hands through a courier service. With much astonishment I tore the wrapping and discovered xeroxed copies of Savitry Roy's books, including *Meghna-Padma* (2nd volume), *Malashri, Ghasful, Trisrota*, and the great *Swarolipi*. I doubt if anything else then which could have made me happier!

By then I was trying to contact family members of Savitry Roy, but both Aziz Bhai and I could not trace anybody. We did get a name, Gargi Chakravarty, supposedly living in Delhi. With this little information, one day when I was going through Aziz Market book shops, I came across a book written by Professor Tanika Sarkar. In the author's foreword she mentioned her gratitude to Gargi Chakravarty. I noted Professor Sarkar's address, and wrote a letter to her asking if that Ms. Gargi was the daughter of Savitry Roy, and whether she could, in her infinite kindness, forward my letter to the former. After a month a letter came with the following words, "Let me first tell you that whenever I hear some researcher wants to work on my mother, my eyes become full of tears..." Though Ms Gargi

wanted me to come to New Delhi to meet her, circumstances unfortunately never did work out in favour of a visit by me, and I could never talk to Savitry's daughter face to face.

Whenever I come across a different work or author, I try to write about it. About Savitry, too, I wrote an article with the title '*Bismritopray Ouponyasik Savitry Roy: Ekti Bhumika*' and Hasnat Bhai - Abul Hasnat, then the literary editor of *Sangbad* - published it in the paper in 2002. But I was still curious. I knew that there was another book called *Paka Dhaner Gaan* and I had to get hold of it. But how? At last I wrote a letter to my uncle-in-law Mr. Montu Das who lived in West Bengal but some 200 kilometers away from Kolkata. However, he did manage to send, at long last, a complete volume of *Paka Dhaner Gaan*. I was very grateful to him - the book's price was 300 Rs, and the postal charge came to Rs 200! Soon afterwards my brother-in-law Professor Sanjoy Adhikary paid a visit to Kolkata and brought back xeroxed copies of the rest of her writings.

Savitry Roy was born at Wari in Dhaka in 1918 but she passed her childhood and adolescent days in Shariatpur, where her parents were permanently settled. In 1934 she appeared at the 'Probeshika Exam' (which later became SSC in Bangladesh and SF in India). After two years she did her Intermediate and got admitted into Bethune College (Kolkata's first college for women) from where she graduated in 1938. She had grown up in a politically conscious milieu and married Shantimoy Roy, a friend of her elder brother Debiprosad Sen, in 1940. It is not known when she first began to be attracted to its cause, but it was in 1941, in the middle of the Second World War, that she became a member of the Communist Party of India. After the birth of Gargi she had to decide to leave her job to take care of the newborn baby.

Savitry had developed a practice of writing poems from her girlhood days. Her first writing, a translated story, '*Chokher Jol Felo na*

*Meriana*' was published in 1944. Her debut novel *Srijon* came out in 1946. The second and third ones *Trishorta* and *Swarolipi* were published in 1950 and 1952 respectively. Her masterpiece *Paka Dhaner Gaan* saw the light of day in 1956-58. Another mega novel, *Meghna-Padma*, came out in 1964-65. The very important point to notice here is that the subject of almost all of Savitry's novels is political Bengal. *Ghasful* and *Bodwip* were published in 1971 and 1972. She was directed to withdraw her novel *Swarolipi* by the Communist Party but she refused. Later, under continuing pressure from the CPI, having no other alternative, she gave up her membership rather than withdraw her book. Some references from that time show that due to this party decision Savitry Roy gradually went into oblivion.

Both *Swarolipi* and *Paka Dhaner Gaan* give a picture of the days before and after the Partition. And her specialty was her vivid and true descriptions that made her novels powerful. What she saw, she has narrated in an artistic way. The famine of 1939, Hindu-Muslim riots before the Partition of India, the Partition itself, the massive refugee exodus, etc., are the core elements of these great books. The simplicity of her stories and narrative style goes on to heighten the power of Savitry Roy as a fiction writer.

It is true that Savitry Roy did not stay a long time in the area which is now Bangladesh after the Partition of 1947, but almost all her writings center on the people, landscape and lifestyle of this part of Bengal. To know the recent past of Bangladesh, to visualise the most horrendous days of our history, to be able to see the outlines of the forthcoming truth reading the books and novels of Savitry Roy is a must.

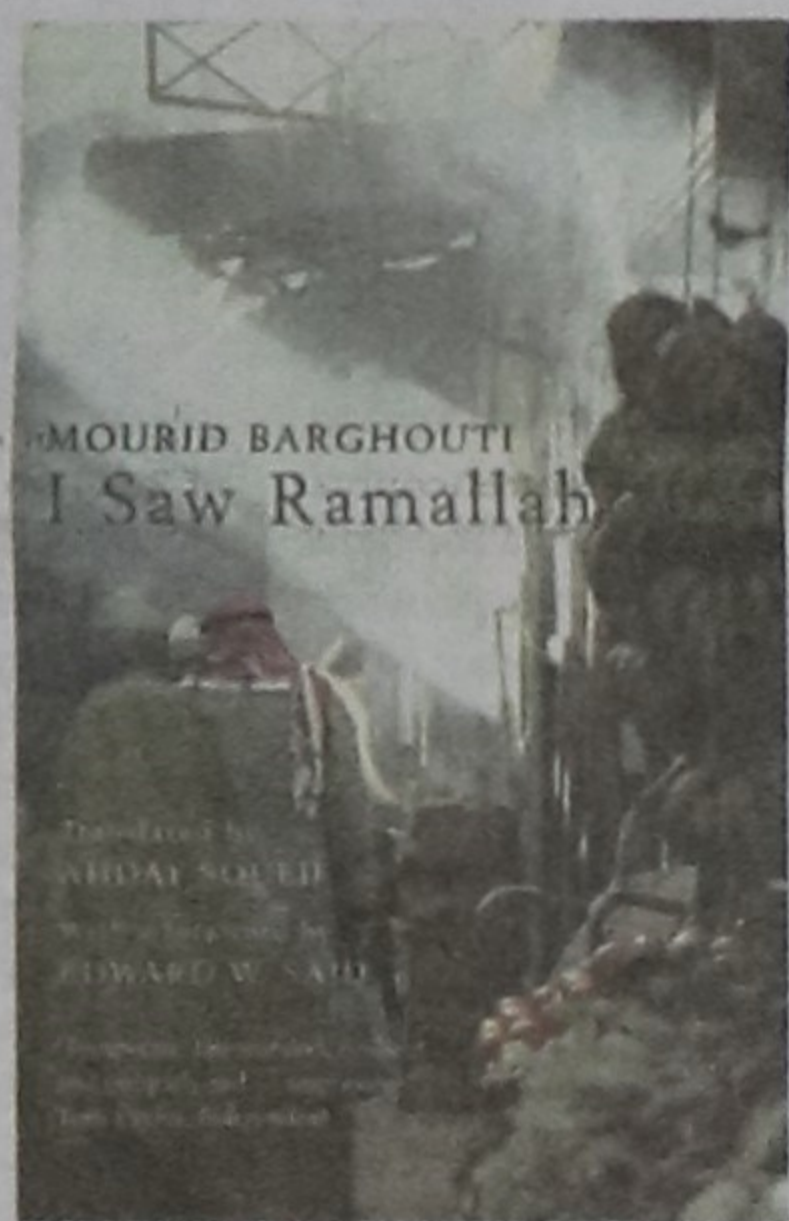
Subrata Kumar Das has set a website called [www.bangladeshinovels.com](http://www.bangladeshinovels.com).

## The Man from Deir Gassanah

SHAHZAD KHAN

'The man from Deir Gassanah' - that's how Mourid Barghouti described himself to a friend of mine in London. Deir Gassanah is the name of the village outside Ramallah that Barghouti once called home, and to which he returned on a visit after almost thirty years later when it was under Israeli occupation. The exile was a forced one. He was in Cairo studying English literature (Yeats and Eliot were the only things he cared about then), when the 1967 Arab-Israeli war broke out. That war saw the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and the subsequent beginning of an occupation whose continuing cruelty and barbarity continue to exact a heavy toll of its original Arab inhabitants. "The essential American soul," wrote D.H. Lawrence in a celebrated description, "is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Had he been alive today, he would have changed the words to 'Israeli soul.'

*I Saw Ramallah* is an acknowledged classic. In re-reading it, I can see why again. Mourid Barghouti (born July 8, 1944) is a poet with 12 published volumes of poetry, and his recording eye is an unsparring, specific and unsentimental one. The book fittingly begins on a bridge across the Jordan River as the author makes his painful journey back to Ramallah, coming back home briefly after a lifetime elsewhere, in Kuwait, Cairo, Budapest, London, Amman. It is the same bridge he crossed thirty years back, at that time unheeding, on his way to Cairo University to sit for his Latin exam. The return journey is fraught with the weight of the years gone by, years when he lived in double exile when an Anwar Sadat, preparing for his 'peace mission' to Israel, deported Barghouti from Egypt, and every tree, every olive grove, every turn of the road is overcast with memories, and broken dreams, and with such a furious longing for lost



land that one can taste it raw in the mouth. Not for nothing had Franz Fanon said that, "For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread, and above all, dignity." The book ends with Barghouti lying in bed on his final night in Ramallah "in a small room, under a window that looks out on countless questions, looks out also on a (Israeli) settlement."

There are three tales here - the Palestinian Diaspora, the loss of home, and the mercilessness of the Israeli occupation - but so interwoven in the poetic stream that the three streams of thought flow into each other, making for a narrative that is, as Edward Said said in his foreword, "one of the finest existential accounts of Palestinian displacement." John Berger found it to be a book that reached "no conclusions, only the passionate pain of exile, recounted at the end of the day by a true poet." Barghouti's language, at least in the unmatched English translation by the equally well-known Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, is spare and unsparring at the same time. It is poetic in its compression, and in the way that each thing is seen in its concrete physical denseness, a compression and density that then transcends its physicality to attain the flight of metaphor and associative thought. It is by that rich mix of concrete detail and metaphorical flight that the book achieves its undoubtedly haunting effect. The tale is told with remarkable simplicity and in a tone that can be universally understood, yet its texture and details, in some case quite unthinkably, remains Arabic, and rooted specifically in the Palestinian earth.

One doubts whether anything similar exists in the dishearteningly burgeoning literature of political exile, asylum, and flight.

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book, their first form. They are our absence. The settlements are the Palestinian Diaspora itself.

I said to myself that the negotiators of Oslo were ignorant of the true meaning of these settlements, otherwise they would never have signed the Agreement.

You look out of the car window on your right and are surprised to find that the narrow, worn strip that carries you has turned into a wide, smooth elegant road. The asphalt shines, and soon it separates out, rising to a hill with classy buildings, and you realize it leads to a settlement.

After a while you look out to your left and you see another settlement and another good, wide road leading up to it. Then you see a third and a fourth and a tenth, and so on.

Israeli flags rise at the entrances, and the signposts are in Hebrew.

Who built all this? When I crossed the bridge, the leader of the Likud, Benyamin Netanyahu, was waiting for the final results that would confirm that he had won the elections. It is the Labor Party then.

Since the time of Ben Gurion, the Labor Party has been building these settlements on our land. The fools of the Likud make a lot of noise about their settlement policy and about each new settlement they build. But the brains of the Labor Party remind me of a story I read long ago about a thief who stole a car.

He returned it to its owners the next day and left them inside it a polite note of apology. He said he had not meant to steal their car, he had just needed it for one night to go out with his sweetheart. And he is returning the car, with two theatre tickets, in apology and to show his goodwill.

The owners smiled and admired the sensitivity of the lover/thief and his good manners.

In the evening they went to the theatre.

They returned late at night to find everything of value stolen from their home.

A killer can strangle you with a silk scarf, or can smash your head in with an axe; in both cases you are dead.

## Cricket: The fastest ball at Dhaka Stadium

KHADEMUL ISLAM

The speedster, the fast bowler, occupies a special place in a cricket team. He is an object of fascination, Zeus with the thunderbolts. In his hand the red leather orb - yet untouched, yet un-bowled - lurks, with the potential to annihilate and lay waste the pretensions of batting maestros, and capable of instilling such blind terror that the battle is half won before it's even been joined. It's only when the opening salvo fails to rip apart the defences of the opposing side that the contest settles into its battle of attrition and guerrilla warfare, with its caves and long marches across the yunan. But first comes the cavalry charge across the open plains, and the corresponding lush warmth generated among the spectators by its open surrender to the atavistic, primitive core which is at the heart of all sports where speed is king, and which in cricket resides in the team's speed merchants. The gods first have to be appeased.

Maybe Michael Madhusudan had seen a fast bowler before he started on his *Meghnad Badh Kabya*:

Out came the Raksasas king astride his Puspaka. Its wheels screamed loudly, spitting sparks. The team of horses neighed with spirit. ... The Puspaka sped along, grinding, growling. Its wheels, like discs of fire, rained sparks everywhere...

Speed kept coming up as I steadily plowed my way through autobiographies and personal accounts by cricketers greats of the recent past: Lloyd, Gower, Boycott, Atherton, Gavaskar, Gattling, Imran, to take just a few. These books are cricket writing's basic bread and butter, not Test tour literature or recondite history, but life-in-the-trenches stuff. The 1960s and '70s yarns are better, when the games were, unlike globalization's dulling effects, sharply edged by issues of race and nation. In 1967 Tony Greig, England's captain, made the West Indian team furious by saying that he intended to make them "grovel." Clive Lloyd in his *Living For Cricket* wrote that "Whether Greig realized it or not, the word 'grovel' is one guaranteed to raise the blood pressure of any black man. It conjures up hated images of hundreds of years of slavery and servility, and its use was compounded, in this case, by the fact that Greig was a white South African... We resolved to show him that the days of groveling were over... Every time Greig came to the wicket... our fast bowler seemed to gain an extra few miles an hour from somewhere. I will never forget (Andy) Roberts charging in to the tall England skipper in the first Test at Trent Bridge and sending the off-stump reeling several yards before he had a chance to put his bat down. It was one of the fastest deliveries I have ever seen..."

Speed! In the service of the disenfranchised, the newly freed and de-colonized!

All the above writers, no matter whether bowler or batsman, sooner or later, veer around, mesmerized, to the topic of fast bowling. Who was the fastest he ever faced. What was the fastest ball, or spell, he ever saw. Or bowled. Speed is the ultimate groove. And aside from the Australian duo of Lillee and 'Thommo', it's the West Indies who were the dream machine, the team that, as one writer put it, "for two decades roamed the world with an invincible swagger." Its fast men started with Hall and Griffith, who handed the baton, or in this case, the ball over to Marshall, Roberts, Holding, Croft, Holder, Daniels, Garner... the list is long, very long. In his *Sunny Days*, Gavaskar talks about Sabina Park in 1976: "The new ball which Lloyd took the next day was just the missile Holding needed for his lethal deliveries... The first ball to Vishwanath must have been the most frightening delivery he has ever faced. It almost took his head with it. A similar delivery after some time crushed Vishwanath's finger, as he defended his face, and Julien again took an easy catch." Holding also bowled what is acknowledged as the best over, to Geoff Boycott, where each successive delivery was faster than the previous one, with Boycott desperately hopping around to get out of the way, until as the crowd's roar reaching a crescendo, the final ball sent the timber cartwheeling! Imran Khan, in his *All Round View*, also wrote of Holding, at a World Series Cup

match in Sydney, "(running) in from one end and Roberts from the other, and it was the only time I ever saw batsmen trying to get away from the strike at one end so they could face Roberts, who was also in his prime. Holding was bowling like the wind: when I went in to bat, the wicket-keeper, Deryck Murray, was standing so far back that I couldn't see how the ball could possibly reach him. Whenever I see Desmond Haynes, I remind him of that spell. He remembers it well: he was fielding at short leg, and he had to shout to Murray to make himself heard, because the keeper was so far away."

And so on, and on... I can't quote from all the books, but the above should give anybody the idea what can go on in the cricket field when a genuine tearaway is running in, all cylinders firing!

So, who, or what, was the fastest you ever saw in Dhaka stadium?

Dunno 'bout you, guv, but for me the answer's easy. In January 1986, when Bangladesh and international cricket were getting to know each other, the Pakistani cricketer Omar Kureishi arranged for a team led by Imran Khan to tour Bangladesh. The Omar Kureishi XI was practically the Pakistan test side then, with players such as Rameez Raja, Salim Malik, Abdul Qadir, Wasim Akram, and an aging but still dangerous Sarfaraz Nawaz, the father of reverse swing. Seated on the upstairs gallery I could see them on the other side of the dividing rope, lolling on their chairs whenever they were batting, a little bored, a little too glamorous for the likes of Dhaka stadium, with its peeling paint and country ways. Imran looked in great shape - as Sunil Gavaskar wrote, he had "one of the most magnificent bodies one can hope to see." Stories still abound about how Dhaka women went nuts for him. Though Imran had been off cricket for two years, from 1982 to 1984, due to an injury, he had recovered to sign up to play for New South Wales in Australia. Slugging it out with the Aussies had toned him up, but when he bowled in Dhaka, it was only fast medium. We couldn't figure it out.

In the match I saw at Dhaka, at one stage when our tail-enders were at the crease, Imran was bowling to Rafiqul Alam, who had just come in. Rafiq was the Bangladeshi pace bowler who was the second man to Badsha's new-ball attack. Imran ran in and bowled a half-volley, to which Rafiq went forward on the front foot and with perfect timing and power, uncorked a blistering straight drive to the boundary. Dhaka stadium erupted into a din that lasted a full two or three minutes. Imran, who hadn't even completed his follow-through, whirled his head sideways in mid-stride to look with utter astonishment at the ball streaking past him. A straight drive! Something which every genuine fast bowler tends to take very personally!

Was it our imagination or did Imran walk back to a longer run-up for the next delivery, and the wicketkeeper move back? Abdul Qadir standing at second slip, we later heard, rubbed his palms together and called out to Rafiq, "Abay, beta, abhi aarai," (rough translation: Oh boy, something wicked is coming this way!). Imran charged in this time and unleashed a bouncer that screamed in straight at Rafiq's head. He barely managed to duck and get his head out of the way, with the keeper collecting the ball at shoulder height. It was the quickest ball I had ever seen bowled in

Dhaka Stadium, and the crowd at first was silent, then went 'Oooooohh!' It was then that we realized, not having seen genuine pace at the international level for a very long time, the Indy 500 speed Imran clocked at when he bowled flat out, that all this time he had really been bowling at half-strength, conserving his energies for the coming tour of Sri Lanka.

Having made his point, Imran took his foot off the pedal and resumed bowling again at half-pace. But that bouncer has stayed with me all these years. Roger Binny bowled here fresh from his triumphs and he didn't come close to that delivery. I didn't even see the ball leave Imran's hand, I picked it up only after it hit the pitch and took off, and the next time I saw it was fractionally later - just before it disappeared into the wicketkeeper's gloves. In-between, I had seen nothing at all...

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## Extract

The car moves toward Ramallah...

I used to tell my Egyptian friends at university that Palestine was green and covered with trees and shrubs and wild flowers. What are these hills? Bare and chalky. Had I been lying to people, then? Or has Israel changed the route to the bridge and exchanged it for this dull road that I do not remember ever seeing in my childhood?

... Did I really know a great deal about the Palestinian countryside? The car moves on and I continue to look out of the windows to my right and to the left of the driver. What is this Israeli flag? We entered our 'areas' a while ago. These, then, are the settlements.

Statistics are meaningless. Discussions and speeches and proposals and condemnations and reasons and amps for negotiation and the excuses of negotiators and all we have heard and read about the settlements, all this is worth nothing. You have to see them for yourself.

Buildings of white stone standing together on a stepped incline. One behind the other in neat rows. Solid where they stand. Some are apartment blocks and some are houses with tiled roofs. This is what the eye sees from a distance.

I wonder what their lives look like on the inside. Who lives in this settlement? Where were they before they were brought here? Do their kids play football behind those walls? Do their men and women make love behind those windows? Do they make love with guns strapped to their sides? Do they hang loaded machine guns ready on their bedroom walls?

On television we only ever see them armed. Are they really afraid of us, or is it we who are afraid? If you hear a speaker on some platform use the phrase 'dismantling the settlements,' then laugh to your heart's content. These are not children's fortresses of Lego or Meccano. These are Israel itself; Israel the idea and the ideology and the geography and the trick and the excuse. It is the place that is ours and that they have made theirs. The settlements are their