

PILGRIMAGE

POETRY

When the spirit soars . . .

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

ALL journeys have destinations both to and from. There are physical and emotional aspects involved in all such journeys but when added to those is yet another aspect, that is, the spiritual, that makes all the difference. Such a journey that is wrapped in an essence of metaphysical or transcendental realm does not have a full stop. It keeps on calling the seeker time and again. An ecstatic state of the mind is felt, a state of fulfillment stirs up an urge to make one's purpose more meaningful by repeating the path not only to make it more in terms of mere number but also to make it better, to make it near-perfect, which can very well be described as the best way of elevating oneself spiritually. After all, are not we all spiritual beings? The Holy Kaabah as it stands in the middle of Masjid al-Haram as an epitome of highest level of spirituality, bears witness to an expression of intense urge of human hearts converging there from all corners of the globe round the year for centuries together.

The feeling that it arouses instinctively on having a glance of the majestic cube covered in a sheen of black and dazzling gold is overwhelming awe that renders one speechless and motionless for a while, when one loses one's sense of time and place. All these years for all these times, while offering one's prayer, one has uttered, " Kabahish sharifate . . ." while at that very moment, the holy Kaabah itself is right in front of one's view. It is unbelievable as one stands face to face to the most ancient house of Allah Subhanuttaala and almost pinches oneself to make sure if one is dreaming or one's long cherished dream has eventually come true. A thing nourished so long in the imagination at last materializes. The experience is simply ethereal as one is engulfed by the awareness of a timeless gift to mankind that makes one connect oneself not only to the life hereafter but also to Allah's grand plan to give us a taste of a promised place called heaven. And this first-hand experience is absolutely heavenly! Ecstasy knows no bounds. Thus a spiritual bridge is built between two lives, accentuating the immortality of the soul. Death ceases to be a phenomenon of loss and grief. At this stage the nimbus that is there in the eyes breaks down into endless tears that do not know when to stop. One's vision remains misty in a complex fusion of emotions. As I stepped in the 'mataf', the compound around the Holy Kaabah where ritualistic circuits are performed, I

Page 2
lost connection with my group that was led by a designated Imam. For a few moments I felt a kind of nervousness but soon after plucked up courage to go ahead with all the steps of Umrath all by myself. And this was all the more triggered by the Bangladeshi cleaner's suggestion, he having heard my story of getting separated from my group and that also having reached Mecca only the night before, that I go back to our hotel. Undaunted, equipped with my preparation for performing Hajj and my basic nature of feeling much less hesitation and fear in work compared to average people, I completed the steps enunciated. Seeing me back at the hotel in one piece, some group mates exclaimed, "You were lost. We waited for you for quite a long time!" I replied that from my end, they were lost as I could not spot them. Only thing that I kept to myself for the sake of keeping my image intact was the number of times I had to ask the police, para police, volunteers and others for the correct door number and its location to get out of

Kaabah Sharif as it has as many as nineteen doors. You take a wrong door and you end up finding yourself in an unfamiliar part of the city and that also as a pilgrim for the first time! I felt Allah's mercy on me as I was able to find my way to where we were housed. Although it was within walking distance from the Kaabah, yet given the initial setback, it could have been hazardous. One of the most striking features at the Holy Kaabah as well as at the Mosque of the Prophet (Masjid-e-Nabbi) is the ever glorious, all-pervading call for prayer, the Azan. Each time one hears it, it ennobles the heart obviously carrying the message to the listener and at the same time filling the earth and every particle of things contained therein, ascending to the sky reverberating in its tone, tune, melody of bliss tinged with a kind of agony as if the human soul in its endless journey is striving to meet its Maker. The heart feels it and the eyes get moistened lost in an unknown horizon. Even the best quality of Azan that we hear in Bangladesh is no comparison with any of those that we experienced there. Another remarkable aspect of both

also one's soul is responding to the azan. Perhaps the most beautiful part in their recitation of Surah Fateha is the last line when mastery of breath control is exemplified in uttering " walad dwa lin " An unusually sweet, long drawl is put on 'dwa' before connecting with 'lin' and the voice waits on the same note, mesmerizing the listener. Such an experience is simply esoteric for a heart to melt. An abundance of tears is the most befitting reward that tells everything.

While on sight seeing in Mecca, it was most elating to notice the names of Jabal-e-Rahmat (Mountain of Mercy) written in about six or seven different languages that included Bengali as well on a big signboard as Rahmat-er Paharh. History has it that Hazrat Adam (Alaihessalam) and Bibi Hawa met at this place after a very long period of time of their separation and also at this place that is situated on the plains of Arafat, our beloved Prophet (pbuh) delivered his farewell speech on performing holy Hajj to the multitudes of people that has remained a watershed in the history of mankind. Equality of all was emphasized.

coming to Medina, all stand there not as silent witnesses but as living witnesses to Page 4
the measure of the man that he was, remains and will remain so. Medina is much more peaceful and tranquil than Mecca. And the reason most probably is the Prophet's (pbuh) holy shadow all around from which springs blessings for all those who seek them. In other words, by staying in Medina one feels much closer to the Prophet (pbuh) than what it has been by only reading on him.

Certain socio-cultural elements manifested themselves in the course of this sojourn and put me in dismay. The manner in which the sacred ritual of tawaf (circumambulation) is mostly done by many from across the globe is the use of muscle power to get one's way at the cost of others. It is strictly forbidden to cause annoyance to others while on Hajj let alone follow the policy of might is right. Jostling takes place literally more often than not. Offering prayers at any place obstructing the course of tawaf is another irritant that occurs quite frequently. It is only natural that people get anxious to seek Allah's mercy. Nevertheless, in so doing, much essence of a convention is lost. As it is, both around the holy Kaabah and Masjid-e-Nabbi, the landscape is lined by high-rise buildings, classy hotels and shopping centres that mar the serenity and sanctity of the surroundings of such holy places. The act of supplication and hustle and bustle of business activities are made to co-exist. Perhaps some naturalness could have been preserved within a certain radius to uphold some traces of the old world that would have been more fascinating and reverential for all in terms of an unfolding of the history of Islam. Another thing that hurt me was that the walls of the adjoining residential buildings to the Mountain of Enlightenment were defaced with graffiti. Perhaps the younger generation is not aware of the fact of its being invaluable and immutable. On a personal note, I experienced something which was a bolt from the blue at the mosque of the Prophet (pbuh) and that also standing very close to his Raowza Mobarak. When I sought a little help from one of the female doorkeepers for a job that she is supposed to do at the Masjid, it is not only that she asked me for a bribe of money but also a group of them became suspiciously cheerful at the thought of earning some extra money illegally at the expense of some trouble that I faced temporarily. My heart sank both in disgust and pain.

Notwithstanding the oddities created by human beings, I remained engrossed in my purpose. My imagination took me back to a journey in the sixth and seventh centuries --- as if I could see the Prophet dispensing his duties and responsibilities Page 5
ordained by Allah, in the midst of a mostly volatile situation prevailing at the time, with exceptional patience and rare piety. One imagines sitting at his feet for the whole time he deliberated on problems and issues of all kinds. And then he comes alive on one's mental screen. He has been a gift to us, to mankind from Allah, the

Merciful, the Beneficent. I have brought back fond memories that are rich and most fulfilling and I shall preserve them in my heart as long as I live. At the same time I keep looking forward to another journey to the same destination that beckons.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, Principal of Radiant International School, is a critic and essayist.



Azan and Salat that I noticed was the sharing of some lines by two imams or muezzins that created an atmosphere of high exaltation through perfect team work. And the control of voice and corresponding use of breathing is simply amazing! This reminded me of Karen Armstrong's assertion as to the necessity of breath control that is "crucial to most of the contemplative traditions" and, likewise, she brings in the example of reciting verses of the Qur'an the way it is done in her highly scholarly book, Muhammad: Prophet For Our Time. One feels like hearing it for a much longer duration as through these heartfelt renderings of invocation, Allah's mercy, are surely to bear fruit. The human spirit Page 3

is once again elevated to hope. The poignancy felt in the Azan evoked memories of some lines in the poem Azan by the nineteenth century epic poet and writer Kaikobad: "Ke oi shonalo more azaner dhoni / morme morme shei shur bajilo ki shumodhur / akul korilo pran nachilo dhomoni." The lines are most touching. One feels when going through these lines that not only one's mind but

Universalism was established through the religion of Islam. A view at Jabal-e-Noor (Mountain of Enlightenment) kept us captivated as the history of revelation of the first verses of the holy Qur'an in the cave of Hera, the first encounter of the Prophet (pbuh) with Angel Jibrail's voice and Bibi Khadija's carrying food for her husband climbing up the mountain, all came alive to our vision. Memories were no longer memories only.

The next trip to Medina was long-cherished in terms of my earnest desire to be there, a dream nesting in my heart for ages. I always felt an irresistible attraction to Medina, the city that gave shelter to our beloved Prophet (pbuh). It set the process of healing his heart from the mindless trials and tribulations that were inflicted on him for the cause of carrying the message of Islam and disseminating them to those who opposed him virulently. One can imagine his plight and at the same time the intensity of his responsibilities and feel a profound empathy for the greatest man on earth. His Rawza Mobarak, his mosque (Masjid-e-Nabbi), Riazu Jannat, Masjid-e-Kuba that he started building with his own hands soon after

In her silent eyes . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Through the twilight zone, through mist and haze
She plods on, as sunray and cloudshade play
Hide and seek with the dreamland of her face.
A tired face, with exhausted contentment, is poetry
The world reads this wild afternoon.

Tales of huge glamour are writ on that tired face
And epic grandeur rises through skin that glows
In rising scales of charisma through those pores.
Exhaustion becomes her as it became Cleopatra,
On that ancient shore of patient waiting.

In her silent eyes glow the lights of distant shores;
The bustle of traders in old fabled cities, the songs
Of women in the passion of unending youth are
Heard. Babylon speaks of Alexander in the refinement
Of her skin. Her smile drips Mediterranean melody.

The swan in her rests in the music of spring leaves
Even as drowsiness seeps into her tired eyes. Along the
Length of that fine neck run streams of noontday
Aspirations. Beautiful hauteur sets a crown of luminosity
On her nose. I watch the nose . . . and wonder.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is with The Daily Star.

Morning Rain

AINON M.

Wrapped in pieces of unspent pleasure
I paused to touch the palette of life, the desire
I drifted inward to the consciousness of pain
And then, appeared a visage in the morning rain
Saying
Hold a note dearly in a line of poetry
Listen to the rhythm of life softly
Yield to the touch of self-willed creation
Feel the boundless space with passion

Come into being with the splendor of drenched universe
See limitless crystal drops fall to disperse
Sing with the alluring orchestra of wind
Hold gracefully the melody of living

Life is but a travelling path, not all is fair
Embrace it and dare

Ainon M. is affiliated with Southern Illinois University Carbondale, USA.

SHORT STORY

WINTER NOTES

Narcissist

ZEENAT KHAN

ON the weekends she became the Avon lady selling cosmetics door to door to unattractive suburban wives. She often laughed when she told me stories from that time. She would say with her soft and husky voice, "Frankie, those women thought I was a gene and I could make them beautiful for their husbands with greasy fingernails." I didn't know what she meant by that but I laughed with her anyway. My mother told all these stories about her young life and struggling family while she was setting up her art studio when we moved into our new home.

Next to the studio there was a very tiny space that my mother helped me to convert into a study where I spent hours and hours reading and looking at encyclopedias about world environment. I called it my chamber and thought myself just like Nathaniel Hawthorne, who also locked himself up in his third floor chamber. He was shy and a puritan with conflicting emotions about his existence. He suffered a brooding sense of isolation and hid himself from the world. I on the other hand did not have tortured reasons like that. I simply avoided meeting people. I did not admit that to anyone. When frequently asked by my peers why at my age I didn't venture out and go to ice skate or the school gymnasium to shoot basketball, I often reasoned that in Chicago's brutal winter my chamber was my safe haven. My mother thought I was a gifted child and therefore my being an introvert just came with the territory. She never made me do anything that I didn't want to do.

Padma Desai and I were both graduate students at Illinois State University. She was doing her MA in social welfare. I met her at her family's restaurant in downtown Chicago the summer of 1999. I was just strolling and suddenly saw a new establishment with a big neon sign that read *Aroma India* and decided to peek in. She was working as a hostess at the restaurant that summer. I loved 'spicy' and 'greasy' Indian food. While in Chicago I stayed at my mother's small apartment in downtown. After I went away to college she sold our cozy suburban house and bought a tiny studio apartment just for herself. Before, along with her paintings she used to make

prints on cloth that she sold in the summer in different flea markets. A few summers I did that with her. Now she mainly paints for different calendar companies and late summer to fall is a very busy time for her. She loves to repaint all the Georgia O'Keefe paintings. Sometimes I think my mother's paintings are also filled with erotic tension and subtle beauty, just like O'Keefe's earlier New York paintings. I have one of my mother's flower paintings in my house in Bhutan. Another thing I took with me as a memento is my son Robbie's 8"-10" inch portrait when he turned five.

When I met Padma she looked exotic with slanted eyes, caramel skin and a mysterious smile. That summer of 1999 I spent most afternoons at her family's restaurant. My mother had some gastronomic ailment and all my life I saw her taking herbal supplements and all the food she made was bland and tasted like paper. I was very much taken in by Padma's mother Sashi. She had a grand smile and she looked very maternally compared to my own mother. I loved the smell of scented bath oil on her and the way she wore her hair that she made like a big bun on top of her head. She wore vibrant colours. She liked me as well and thought I was underfed. When I ordered food at her restaurant she would make sure my servings were generous. And she never charged me for Indian dessert. I loved her rice pudding that she made herself in the restaurant kitchen.

I blended in easily with them for some reason. I seldom saw her father Ramesh because he looked after the business side of their very busy restaurant and was in a back office most of the time. He always looked exhausted from doing book-keeping. I stayed out of his way. He pretty much ignored me if he saw me. I married Padma after six months. We just went to the city hall to avoid dual ceremonies. Sashi was the only one who seemed very unhappy that we had eloped. My mother said nothing. Within a year we had a son and suddenly I started to feel restless and was looking for ways to get out. Padma just stopped talking to me. She took a job with the social services and during the day she left Robbie with her mother at the restaurant. I didn't feel equipped to take care of my own son. Padma

never complained except cast me looks of disdain! I was mostly at my mother's art studio moping and doing nothing basically. That is when my mother said maybe I should go and visit P in Bhutan.

Our marriage didn't last beyond the second year and by then Robbie was talking and demanding attention. I felt suffocated. I left Padma and our son to save the world. Actually, I do not care about saving anything, let alone the world. Everything about life is not black and white. I needed a cover to run away from my family that I made without much thought and from the responsibilities that were piling up on me. I do not actually believe in sentiments. People often commented that I was a 'cynic' and I took that as a compliment.

The only person who really got to me a little was Glory. She knew exactly what I was thinking or saying better than I did myself from across the border. I never admitted to her that she always was right. She tried to know me a little better, but I pushed her away. I did not believe in love and I was afraid that is what she needed or wanted from me. She never gave me any reason for me to feel this way, but I convinced myself of that. From the very beginning I made it clear that we had nothing in common and I had no desire to take it anywhere. Glory wrote back saying how her mountain hydrangeas were in full bloom, or how she found the perfect hand painted photo frame to finally put the picture of the red Panda that she took during her last mountain hike, and was trying to figure out how to fix the broken back door of her small rented house. Then she would add a postscript just to touch slightly about something in reference to my email that she was responding to. Once she wrote, "We both love to read Yasunari Kawabata and we agreed that Snow Country is the best work of literature."

It felt like she was not seeing what I was writing. I think it was only my imagination that she wanted something beyond friendship. She wrote to me the very first time that she had no hidden agenda and the only thing she expected was pure unadulterated friendship. One time, without thinking, I wrote that she was gregarious and energetic and she should keep on smiling. Then I dreaded for days if she was going to write me a love note back. She did not. She in a

banal sort of way replied how lovely that I thought that. She makes me feel normal when I think about her. But I do not like feeling that way.

I write her my last email. I thank her for keeping me company during my greyest days. I tell her that I like living alone in my cocooning comforts in my small house that I had built myself after arriving in Thimpu and this house I built with only 'me' in mind. Then I spell it out for her --- that I cannot continue writing to her and hope she takes it in the right spirit. I give her a reason like a dopey and insensitive high school kid after corresponding with her for quite sometime. I tell her I am a cynic and a narodnik and I find her to be too upfront with her feelings. This simply doesn't sit quite well with me. I even try to reason that I am a quiet person and I am unable to give her what she is hoping to get from me. I end my email saying I cannot handle her any further. I was expecting a flurry of long and emotional emails that she would follow up with a phone call. She did not write but called. She simply said in that case she would go away and her life meant something to her and she would continue on her path where she would seek truth and beauty. She said I would be wrong in thinking that someone like 'me' could diminish her in any way. She will not invest her emotions for a narcissist anymore. From this point on to her I will be just like a comet in a night sky that she had only glanced at for a few seconds. The phone went dead. After that I never heard from her again. It has been sixty -three days.

Tonight it feels unusually warm for a winter night. I go and sit out on the porch and all around me is this twittering silence and I see the evening light is flickering in the trees. I look at the jacaranda bushes with their purple flowers. At night the flowers look like dark heads without faces that are staring at me. I get up to go inside and think moonsoon is not until another five months. That is my favourite season. I can lie in my hammock with a bottle of crisp Vouvray and listen to the rain all by myself.

Zeenat Khan studied English and American literature at the University of Rhode Island. She lives in the US. This is the concluding segment of her story, the earlier segment of which appeared last week.

In Purabi Basu's company

FARIDA SHAIKH

JUST think of it for a moment. Isn't it a puzzle that in spite of declining reading and downsized bookshops' book launch events are so much the 'in' thing these days? Publications of new books call for celebrations, and this is what is happening every day in Dhaka.

Reading, so much like writing, is a lonely travel through time. The ancient Greek sage Cicero said, 'A room without books is like a body without a soul.' And, then, after him, a modern book lover notes that 'books nurture the soul.'

So on 10 January at the Jatiyo Press Club on a 'paush masher shither deen,'



in the company of prominent literati and Begum Motia Chowdhury, the minister for Agriculture, I was present at the launch of Purabi Basu's *Nari Srishti O Biggan*. The book is a product of Nabajuga Prokashani which, according to the writer, truly is more a literary connoisseur than a publisher, totally devoid of the popular sense of making big profits from the book publication business. Basu's work is likely to have an English edition in the near future.

The book is outstanding for it introduces, perhaps for the first time, gender specific issues--the politics and power hidden behind female and male interaction. Through the twenty two titled chapters of the book, the writer raises the reader's consciousness to new heights by focusing on findings in

medical science and the congruency of the social and cultural norms that takes shape. The presentation and projection of these findings are then media filtered, shaped and designed for target viewers and readers.

Written in Bengali, the book is a first in initiating a discussion on female genital mutilation (FGM). There is a lengthy discourse on the injuries inflicted on female genital organs and on the broad issue of overall exercise of control over female sexuality.

Singular or plural decision-making on the subject of pregnancy, the basic facts on this female biological function and prevention of unintended pregnancy are detailed. What are the risks of abortion? The decision to abort and the responsibilities that follow are clearly noted.

A section of the book focuses on pharmaceutical care and intervention on the female body. The male as the continuous and constant counterpart of the female is dwelt upon in the writing. The book, like a whistleblower, draws attention to the ever-growing monopoly of human organs and situating the female body as a reproductive machine.

Based on scientific findings, the major portion of the work also cites examples from day to day life. Primarily it uncovers grey areas of patriarchy; subjects that have remained camouflaged for long are now open to discussion, for purposes of adopting an egalitarian approach to empowerment and evaluation of female and male social status.

A particular chapter emphasises an extreme need for cooperation, compassion, collaboration and coordination. Such social values then are only ensured, the writer assumes, through a state formulated by women. It, therefore, deserves mention that this proposition approximates *Sultana's Dream*, a tale from Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hossain.

The final chapter of the book enlists and discusses the merits of women Nobel Prize winners. The current year's awardees include two women scientists for chemistry, one (and for the first time) for economics and, of course, Herta Muller for literature.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and regular book reviewer.