

REFLECTIONS

LITERARY NOTES

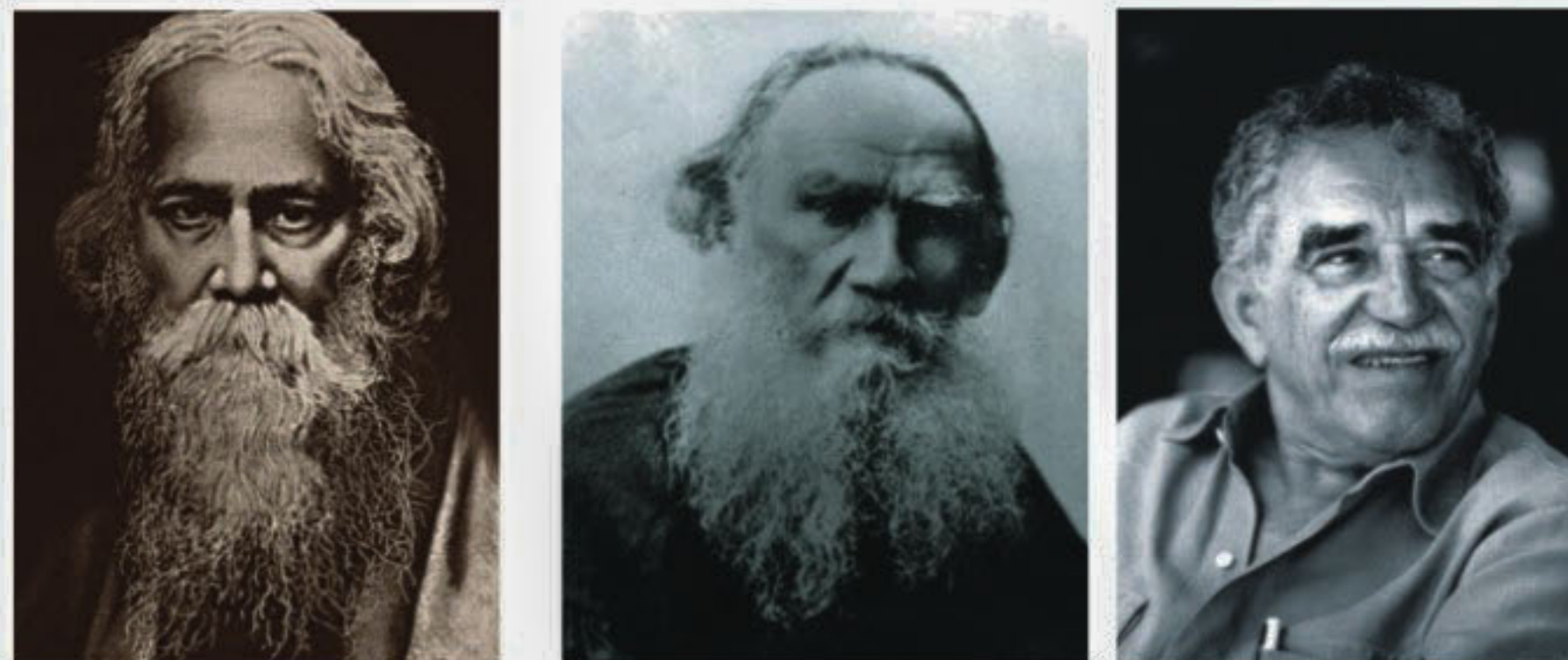
## The magic in literature

EKRAM KABIR

WHEN Omar Khayyam wrote, "I desire a little ruby wine and a book of verses, just enough to keep me alive, and half a loaf is needful" in the eleventh century, he was pretty convinced that reading was one of the most important aspects in a person's happiness. After all these years, the appeal of books and reading them has remained the same. A good work of fiction or a thought-provoking poem is capable of leaving a lifetime impact on people's minds. It won't be an overstatement to say that Khayyam left some perfect lines for book lovers to apply to their thoughts on literature.

But why does literature matter in our lives? I've been putting this question to a few friends. One said that literature matters because it's related to life. But another said: "Literature matters, so does mud-wrestling." He argued that everything that's related to life matters. However, yet another friend, a teacher of literature, came up, saying that it makes you ask questions and feel alive to the world. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can certainly make you ask hundreds of questions. EM Foster's *A Passage to India* ends with a million dollar question: whether Dr. Aziz was responsible for Mrs Moore's psychological changes. This friend of mine, however, opposed the popular notion that literature makes you a good human being.

Whether literature makes you a good human being may be a subject of debate, but one cannot deny the fact that it gives humans the strength to go on when the chips are down. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is perhaps the best example of human existence. Don't you feel an unfathomable strength rising inside you when you read or recite Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Bidrohi*? Literature could be important for a nation in terms of national identity; it provides a nation a certain character which, in the end, would leave a universal appeal in the context of any nation in the world. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example, is a great "Russian" novel, but the plot can be anybody's story. Tolstoy has successfully given Russia a character that would be remembered by his



readers.

Sometimes, works of literature tell a nation's history in such a way that readers prefer novels over history books. Read Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It's the Latin American "boom" in literature. You'll find elements of romance and fantasy and, on top of these, a deep insight into Latin American history. Haven't Tagore's works given Bengali literature a certain place across the world? No one has ever disputed this fact.

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame, A Tale of Two Cities, North and South Trilogy and Roots* all these famous novels leave intense imprints on our minds about those times and places. And the imprints remain till the day we leave this world. With *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman could reach out to common Americans with an epic. He has been highly successful in singing of America's democratic spirit.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* is a novel of life in ancient Rome and of the catastrophic volcanic eruption that destroyed the city of Pompeii, AD 79. The Rome of a century earlier is captured in Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March*, which centres around the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. Britain was then a far outpost of the Roman Empire, a half-savage land that is used by Anya Seton in *The Mistletoe and the Sword*.

While literature can paint a country with a certain identity and give Nature a certain entity, it can also create characters - human characters. Writers observe people and their

lives around us and capture them with their imaginative powers. When I read or watch Shakespeare's plays, I feel the characters he created are still present around me, talking to me.

Having said that, I feel that literature sometimes adds fire to revolution or social change. Thomas Paine wrote pieces such as *The Rights of Man, Letter to George Washington and The Age of Reason*, which inspired democratic governments, freedom of thought, and religion. Paine's *The American Crisis* inspired American troops to continue their battle for independence from England. Songs broadcast by Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro inspired Bangladesh's freedom fighters in 1971.

"Mothers are hardly ever pitied," wrote Maxim Gorky in his landmark novel *Mother* around a hundred years ago. The novel is about the pre-revolution proletariat of Russia and focuses on the role women played in the struggle of the Russian working class on the eve of the revolution in 1905.

Literature matters because, to me, it's magic. And the people who create literature must have been going through a magical state of mind. Nazrul couldn't have written *Bidrohi* if he wasn't possessed. For Nazrul, to my mind, it wasn't just a "spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions" like the English Romantics. I feel, therefore, that we will have to share a slice of that magic from poets and writers like him in order to understand why literature matters.

Ekram Kabir is a journalist, critic and poet.

## To write, to publish

FARIDA SHAIKH

FEBRUARY, the Bangla month of Falgun, is our precious month. It is our time of reckoning---recollecting the past and calculating the future; to renew our pledge for Bangla Bhasha.

This is a cherished month for publishers. The Ekushey Boi Mela is participated in by around three hundred large and small publishing houses of the country. During this time, Bangla Bazar in Dhaka is like Dariyaganj of Delhi and College Street of Kolkata, the hub of publishers.

Amidst this book business there came a tourist publisher from the long ago land of Marco Polo. There has been an emerging European need---to understand Asia--- particularly awakened giant China and growing up giant India.

The Italian publisher was out here to discover contemporary innovative authors and translate their works. He was in search of young writers who have had first hand experience with reality. The focus was on novelistic writing with a sociological setting, such as the urban milieu and a closer look at the metropolises. The familiarity of the writer with the place, the physical and social content and relevance, the physical design of neighborhoods, the matrix of social and cultural relationship within the inhabitants were the focus.

Andrea Berrini was set on such a venture---to connect Italian readers with Asian writers, and so bridge the existing gap. Himself a writer and in partnership with the Italian publisher Guinte Editore, an age-old brand in Italian publishing, he has recently set up Metropoli D'Asia, his own publishing house, [andrea.berrini@metropoliasia.it](mailto:andrea.berrini@metropoliasia.it)

The pursuit of his literary mission in India was favored by Berrini's close promotional connections with Zubaan-Penguin India. This recent tie-up, though limited to four books a year, 'is an extremely innovative and imaginative move that perhaps may not have been possible in the West.' Together, the 'collaborative strengths' gets Zubaan writers 'more exposure and sale...marketing and distribution.'

Situated in this innovative marketing niche was Shazia Omar's *Like a Diamond in the Sky*, a Penguin Zubaan publication 2009. Picked up for translation by Metropoli d'Asia, the book was to be showcased on European bookstands, with an Italian title and image cover: *Come un diamante nel cielo*, translated by Andrea Sirrotti, a self employed translator and co author of *Four Hundred Thousand Stars*.

The publisher's catalogue review labeled the Italian

version as a crime novel from Bangladesh. This year, in May, the book fair in Toulon will focus on India and Bangladesh. A detailed discussion was held at Red Shift Café between the publisher and Writers' Block on Saturday, 30 January.

The Reading Circle, TRC, a group of regular readers, met on 17 January at Red Shift over a reading session of Shazia Omar's *Like a Diamond in the Sky*. The central theme of the novel is the social malady--- alienation as succinctly noted by Sal Imam. A feeling of isolation and estrangement runs deep within family, between friends, the extended community and society at large. The psycho-social social problems that confront the young in the urban setting are clear. In addition, as a western reader remarked, the writer has hit the nail right on the head. Drug addiction and rehabilitation is not only this country's problem; it is just as big a problem in the



western countries.

According to the chief of Penguin India, book business is tough in a country where the average sale of an English novel is between 3000 and 5000 copies. For the same product in Bangladesh, no figures are available. One may safely assume that such figures would be bleak and almost inconsequential.

In India, more publishers are publishing in regional languages. There are 18 such languages throughout the country. On the other hand, Bangladesh has one language. Even a cursory look will affirm that Bangla book publication has reached a commendable standard and is at par with the international publications. The small cost of Bangla books suits the purse and pockets of all readers.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and organizes book discussions.

PROFILE

POETRY

## Dr Maniruzzaman: Humble man of letters

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

DR Maniruzzaman, a veteran linguist of the country, turns 70 on 15 February. A university professor, essayist, poet, folklorist and administrator, Dr Maniruzzaman has served at many institutions and performed many duties in fifty years of his working life. He has 18 books to his credit while eight other books edited by him have been received with acclaim.

Born in 1940, Dr Maniruzzaman spent his early childhood in different places of West Bengal. In 1947, when the Indian subcontinent experienced the greatest tumult in its history through Partition, he returned to his

ancestral home at Adiabadi district. He completed his Matriculation and Intermediate in 1953 and 1957 respectively. He took his BA (Hons) and Masters degrees from Dhaka University in 1960 and 1961.

Dr Maniruzzaman joined the Bangla Department of the University of Chittagong in 1968 after having taught at different colleges. From the University of Mysore, he obtained a PhD in linguistics in 1979.

His books on language include *Bhasha Shomoshya O Onyanyo Proshongo* (1969), *Diglossia in Bangladesh and Language Planning* (1983) and *Bhasha Totto Onushilon* (1985). These works certainly boosted his reputation. He has several books



on folk research as well, notably *Bangladesher Lokshongskriti Shondhan 1947-71* and *Lokshahityer Bhetor Bahir*. His books on literature are *Nawab Fajjonnesa, Shannidhye O Gourabi Smorone, Bangla Sahitye Oitit O Uttarkal, Sahityo Sangskritite Chattogram, Goshih Patrika O Shamoyik Potro*, etc.

In the creative fields of the literary genre Dr Maniruzzaman has contributions too. His volume of short stories, *Purush Porompota*, came out in 1970, in the early stage of his career and brought him some fame as a writer of fiction as well. He has authored two volumes of poems, *Idaning Biponno Boro* and *Nodite Megher Chaya*.

A very friendly, cooperative, punctual and sincere teacher, Dr Maniruzzaman is also a good orator. The few times that I have found him speaking in public, I found his comments very relevant and thought-provoking. He has been involved with many national and international organisations. Since the inception of the Bangladesh Literary Resource Centre (BLRC) in 2006, his presence as an advisor to the organisation has been intellectually stimulating. The young men and women who have had the good fortune to be his students will always relish the sight of the polite and humble teacher that Dr Maniruzzaman is.

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VALENTINE THOUGHTS

## 'Every moment spent with you ...'

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

WHAT happens if one day you are caught cheating on your Valentine; what happens even if the heart is broken into a thousand pieces? Does it really matter? After a bomb blast, trees are uprooted; buildings blown sky high; and sounds of window panes breaking are heard from afar. But have you ever heard a heart break? Buildings are reconstructed with improved looks; trees are replanted with imported saplings; but what happens to the broken heart? The crevice never heals!

Let me tell you a story. A madly in love couple do not find a place to converse in private amidst the busy city life. The man proposes that they spend a day at a resort. The woman naturally declines the absurd offer. But, as both their families have agreed to their marriage, so after much convincing and cajoling she gives in. That very day there is a raid at the resort to round up the prostitutes. In the process our heroine also gets caught, with journalists clicking away as usual. Ironically all the men wait outside watching the game. The girls are all sent off to jail except this woman who succeeds in proving that the man is indeed her fiancé. Her mother reprimands her but her genuine tears convince the mother that she has not done anything wrong. Her mother-in-law had spoken to her on the phone only, so she could not identify her on the news. But the rest of the neighborhood makes it difficult for her to survive. When she asks her fiancé to marry her, he declines saying that it

was impossible on his part, as he was working for a multinational company. His job would be at stake. In addition, his mother would never accept her. Dumped, heart-broken and jobless, she turns into a prostitute. He must have had a second choice or else how could he have dumped her? And, yes indeed, soon she finds out that he marries his boss' daughter. The end is quite corny



but it actually happens in real life. Don't you ever cheat on your love? You could not even fathom how much it hurts to find out that the person who had promised to lay the stars at your feet has found a new interest in someone else!

What is true love? It is giving away most of your bed while you hang off the edge. Love tries stealthily to locate the heart, making a space within, at the

same time stealing your rest and peace of mind. Little did St.Valentine know that his chit, 'I love you', would become the lifeline for millions around the world. From card vendors to CD sellers, business is at its peak at the approach of Valentine's Day. Shy ones take the help of audio CDs to say *koto bar bhebe chhinu apona bhulia, tomaro chorone dibo ridoyo tulia* or *mora ar jonome*

*hongsho mithun chhilam*. But then, not everyone can express his love in the fashion of Tagore or Nazrul. The brave ones, on the other hand, straight away confess their love.

*Diney diney mullo biney, sheje amay nilo kinney*. . . In a world where it costs even to breathe, it is definitely a welcome note. Valentines die a thousand deaths everyday without any rhyme or

reason. Sometimes even a glance at someone else can be a cause of distrust and jealousy, this possessiveness is self-destructive! It is this silly love which makes you want the 'whole' of the most important person in your life. If there is depth in your love you might be able to forgive, even if you catch the person red handed cheating on your love, and your *amour-propre* cries out *emon ekta prem jodi petam, je prem kobhu na hoto shesh, shudhu obhiman ar onuragey roye jeto shey premer resh*. Your new trust gives meaning to a pointless world and you start loving life all over again, never realizing that your love was always there enfolded in your bosom. This love overpowers you and your Valentine becomes for you your reality as well as your dream; your thirst, at the same time your aqueous; your restlessness and also your peace of mind. You find your *cri de coeur* baseless as the person was always there to draw you in the arms to bring you near.

Here is a line for one who cries *chaina banchte ami premhin hajar bochhor*. I would try to boost your morale by insisting that you have nothing to lose. Love yourself and accept it as a *fait accompli*. Enjoy life and remember there is no need to despair, just try to remember the eternal call, *jodi tor daak shuney keu na ashe tobe ekla cholo re*. There is peace in that attitude too! Instead of some imaginary 'security of love', trust me, it is better to remain on one's own. Make it a *vorboten* acreage for you, adapt a placid attitude towards life, don't loathe it and it will dish out peace which often lovers long

for after bickering. Don't you ever yearn, long or pine for Valentines for sometimes if it's not the right one you might regret all your life.

*Kuch log rooth kar bhi lagte hain kitne pyaare!* For those who believe in this idea, I would suggest they sing *nijhoom raatey prodeep jelechhi tarar, bondhu tumi eshogo kachhe amar*. If still you think you are not expressive enough then go ahead and tell your Valentine *ami eto je tomaye bhalobeshechhi tobu mone hoy e jeno go kichhu noy keno aro bhalobeshe jete parena hridayo*. Let the person know that the destination of all your dreams and aspirations is one. Now croon along with Aerosmith, 'I can stay awake just to hear you breathing, I can spend my life in the sweet surrender, I can stay lost in this moment forever coz every moment spent with you is the moment I treasure.' To round it up, there are a few tips for fresh Valentines. Rejoice, unite, make sacrifices for the ones you love. We all have to value these qualities as Allah has bequeathed them to us. On this occasion, forgive all wrongs, make amends, love the unloved and tell our loved ones once again how much we love them, not by saying 'I love you' but in the language of song: *tumi srabone-o asho jodi khoti nei, ami phaagun ke rakhbo dhorey*.

You walk along the sidewalk not wanting the dawn to break the romance of the night humming *lagja galey ke phir ye hasene raat ho na ho shayed phir is janam mein mulakaat ho na ho*....

Mohsena Reza Shopna is a critic and Past President, Inner Wheel Club of Dhaka North.

... from SANGITA AHMED

### Rain

Dusky skies make sweet love  
To the parched brown earth  
Showering her being  
With tender moist kisses  
Each leaf, each bud  
Is soft with warm desire  
She sighs for the rain  
Never to end  
As the luscious drops  
Caress with slow deliberation  
And the winds scream  
The earth trembles  
As the heat rises  
From the earths core  
When the lightning dies  
Quiet descends  
The warm soaked earth  
Is radiant  
With the musky scent  
Of satiated love.

### Promise of Heaven

Is the coveted so elusive?  
Or the unseen desirable?  
Does the tongue taste  
The apple so sweet?  
Or does the eye  
Perceive sweeter?  
Was the Sin  
So blissful?  
Or the temptation stronger?  
I will never know  
Till the day we meet  
Till the moment of wonder  
When our eyes meet once more  
Till the warmth of your breath  
Till the sinews of your arms  
Till the span of your breast  
Till the melting of your tongue  
Till the end of time  
I shall yearn I shall dream  
Of you, me and Heaven

Sangita Ahmed is a poet and broadcaster.