

ESSAY

FICTION

# Women and animals in Byron's life

SYED NAQUIB MUSLIM

Let us suppose for a moment, in an on-going teaching session on the English Romantic poets, a traditional teacher asks his or her learners: "Can you accurately spell out the full name of Byron?" What may be the potential responses? My present experience as a university teacher in English suggests, at least eighty per cent of them will fail to give a right answer. It is not because the name is difficult but because today, very few students have the propensity to research into writers they study in each semester. Moreover, forgetting names of writers, teachers, relatives, friends, colleagues and acquaintances is now almost endemic in casual learners. Senior English teachers will certainly bear me out that it had been customary in our time to dig out the essential details of writers' lives before their texts were taken up for explication. However, let me answer the question for those who stumble in recalling Byron's name in full. It is George Gordon Lord Byron who was the most 'flamboyant' among the British poets and is rated as a true embodiment of literary Romanticism.

Lord Byron still remains an enigmatic and controversial figure to critics and students of English literature. He became a subject of intense interest to biographers for many reasons. In the words of Richard P. Dean, "His colourful aristocratic ancestry, his reckless and defiant spirit, his scandalous separation from his wife and subsequent exile in Italy, his death after joining the Greek revolutionaries in their fight against Turkey" became the subjects of ceaseless inquiry. Ernest Boyd described Byron as "the rake, the daredevil, the rebel." G. Wilson Knight finds in him the virtues of "chivalry, courtesy, humility and courage." Mary Shelley, wife of another Romantic poet P. B. Shelley, described her family friend Byron as a "fascinating, faulty, childish, philosophical being."

The only son of his parents, Byron became an orphan when he was only three. He began life in a poverty-ridden family governed by an angry but affectionate widowed mother. Initially, Byron survived barely on private tuition but within years fortune smiled upon him when his renown as a poet began to spread far and wide. His autobiographical monologue, Childe Harold, and a continuous flow of publications began to fetch him huge income.

Two dominant traits, however, surfaced in the character of Byron: his love for women and love for animals. Love for women received precedence before critics whereas his love for animals, a unique virtue, remained unrevealed when his character was gauged by teachers, critics and students.

Byron was held guilty of promiscuity as reportedly he had involvement with more than two hundred women. Mostly accosted by fashionable infatuated ladies, Byron got involved in a series of love affairs. Although Byron had a deformed right foot resulting from a physician's mistreatment, both local and foreign ladies felt attracted to him for his aristocratic lineage, gregarious demeanour, witty conversation, sexual precocity, and above all, his seductive appearance. Byron was conspicuous not only for his "so beautiful a countenance" but also for his scholarship. Educated at Cambridge, he digested "about four thousand novels, including the works of Cervantes, Fielding, Smollett, Richardson, Mackenzie, Sterne, Rabelais, and Rousseau." He was then only nineteen.

When Byron was only seven, he fell in love with his cute cousin Mary Duff who, after ten years of relationship with Byron, got married to another man. At home he fell in love with a cousin Margaret Parker who ignited in him the fire of poetry. At fifteen, he fell in love with yet another cousin, Mary Chaworth, for whom Byron used to nurture deeper feelings. He also became close to his half-sister Augusta Leigh, although later she got married to her own cousin. When Byron was still planning an elopement with Augusta, Lady

Melbourne convinced him not to do it.

In 1813, he had a brief, 'platonic' affair with Lady Frances W. Webster, who became the subject of gossip for her scandalous affair with the Duke of Wellington. As Lady Webster and Byron staged a parting, Byron kept it on record in his poem "When We Two Parted":

When we two parted  
In silence and tears,  
Half broken-hearted,  
To sever for years,  
Long, long shall I rue thee  
Too deeply to tell.

As I mentioned earlier, his Childe Harold brought an irresistible flow of female admirers of whom Lady Caroline Lamb stood conspicuous for her social rank. Caroline, whom Byron dubbed as a 'volcano' and who was already married to the Hon. William Lamb, developed an infatuation for Byron. William could sense it but did little to dissuade her wife. However, Caroline was shocked to know that Byron had in the meantime won a 'new conquest' involving Lady Oxford. When she requested him to keep Lady Oxford



out, Byron replied: "It is impossible she comes at all times at any time and the moment the door is open, in she walks--I can't throw her out of the window." Caroline later ended her affair with Byron, an act that prompted her to produce a novel, Glenarvon, where she depicted Byron as the evil. Biographers report she caused considerable mental distress to him. As a psychic relief, compensatory measure, and persuaded by Augusta, Byron married Ann Milbanke. Belonging to a fully discrete discipline and mindset, Ann did not prove a true match for an impulsive and volatile Byron. Ann, a mathematician, faced a tough time getting along with the moods and needs of an exceptionally romantic husband like him. After fifteen months, the ill-starred marriage ended in a formal split. With Shelley and Mary Shelley, Byron was already intimate, and in the process, he came in touch with Mary Shelley's step-sister Claire, who "forced herself on Byron" and bore him a daughter Allegra, who died of fever at five.

The above events may suggest to casual readers the "frenzied debauchery" of Byron but then another side of him

remains unknown to many --- his constant and spontaneous love for animals. Although not truly a match for Byron, Coleridge had similar love and fascination for animals, which was manifest in his deathless poem 'The Ancient Mariner'. Most of Byron's letters, numbering about 3000 and written to a host of friends, bear enough testimony to his uncommon love for animals. In conversations with friends, he used to express genuine concern for animals whenever they became indisposed. For example, when his most favourite dog Boatswain was attacked with rabies, he nursed him, sponged his foaming jaws with unprotected hands. Newstead Abbey, Italy, where Byron migrated, later became a new home for hedgehogs and tortoises brought from Greece. When a goose was decaying from sickness, Byron fed it with his own hand.

Wherever he shifted --- to Venice, Pisa --- he carried and maintained his menageries. At Cambridge, where keeping dogs was prohibited, Byron kept a tame bear in a turret at the top of a staircase. During his trips to Italy, he used to take his dogs with him. Those who took animal-hunting as a sport were condemned by him. He rebuked even the clerics for indulging in fox-hunting exploits. This virtue was admired by Byron's married Italian mistress Teresa Guiccioli as a "weakness of a great heart." How he used to detest fishers for their cruel fishing is manifest in the following lines of his masterpiece Don Juan, a satire against modern civilisation:

And angling, too, that solitary vice,  
Whatever Isaac Walton sings or says.  
(Lines 845-846)

Byron wanted that all the caged birds of the world should be unbound to let them enjoy resort to nature. Byron's soul must be contented to know that today voices are being raised across the world for the abolition of zoos everywhere, and for championing installation of safari parks to let animals move free in a natural environment.

When his dog Boatswain died, Byron buried him in the same way a lover buries his beloved, and put a tombstone inscribing therein: "Near this spot are deposited the remains of one who possessed beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all other virtues of man without his vices." This unusual act unduly earned for Byron the disgrace of being a misanthrope, and he became at once the subject of derision and admiration.

Unhappy in wedded life, and tired of being pampered by scores of adoring ladies, Byron chose to live an exiled life. He left England for ever in 1816 and began making trips one after another to Portugal, Greece, Italy, Albania, Brussels, Switzerland, Malta, in quest of fresh fortune and peace. At thirty-six he, a staunch advocate of liberty, sought to join the struggle to free Greece from Turkish domination. He contracted a fatal rheumatic fever that cut his life short; and the many more poetic resources that were yet to spring from him ceased for good. In 1824 Byron died in Greece. Through his sufferings and agonies created partly by circumstances and partly by self-indulgence, and by dying an untimely death, Byron has taught us that frivolity and promiscuity may provide temporary delight but it ultimately ruptures life itself, and that a wrong, abrupt, and emotive choice of a life partner may make one's life hell here on this very earth.

The words Byron inscribed on his dead dog's tombstone are best suited for the poet's own epitaph as --- "beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity" --- depict much of his character. George Gordon Lord Byron embodies the Romantic essence and remains a brilliant enigma to his readers and admirers even today.

Syed Naquib Muslim, PhD, a former secretary to the government of Bangladesh, teaches English and HRM at a private university.

REFLECTIONS

# For whom the bell tolls

HELAL MOHAMMED KHAN

There is a certain charm in the chime and resonance of a sounding bell. While the chime chills you with a soothing effect, the dings leave their continued and long-lasting resonance. Long-lasting, I said, not ever-lasting, did you notice? And that is because, however a sounding bell reverberates, you simply do not let yourself lost into it. In our practical lives, we are rather keen to make a meaning of all these bells around, be it in the schools or exam halls, in offices or households, of one from a Monday church or from a rickshaw at our back, simply because we know they carry actions associated with them.

So, bells do call for some actions, huh? But how do you get to their calls? As we know, in a decent society, there are certain simple and universal ways of 'ringing the bell'. The affected people do not always draw others' attention by forcing strikes, vandalising cars and shops, or pushing a mob against the government. The concerned and the decent among them usually write, and on rare occasions, speak only, expecting attention to matters requiring attention.

We are close to the point here. And I know you are all concerned citizens. Please tell me, how you prefer to express concerns? How about writing essays in various forms: newspaper eds and op-eds, critical analyses in journals and project papers, academic research, etc? Okay with those? If so, then how about a few of them composed within a decade's timeframe, on one big issue, and in one 'small' country? Hola, here we have Dristipat Writers' Collective with their latest, "Between Ashes and Hope".

The fate of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and its indigenous people has been an issue of real concern in academia and in the development forum, not sure if that much in governance or even among citizens. Articles and publications like this recent one have always been 'good works' and 'big releases', but while we review a new one (this one is in a form of a well-laid anthology) let us expend a few words on their effects and follow ups. And I am in a mood to keep you on questioning today. Let me just make sure that you do 'care'.

In August 2004, when in Mexico, our 'Chakma Raja' Devasish Roy (he was attending the 10th IASCP conference) noted that while the peace-treaty CHT saw its 'elites' favoured, 'a large section of inhabitants of the relatively remote areas, especially those with no formal titles to land, have continued to be largely ignored by development planners', you surely thanked him for speaking on behalf on the minnows. Because you cared, right?

A decade back from now, in 2001 (five years after the Kalpana abduction), when Manosh Chowdhury in 'The Diary of Kalpana' published by Hill Womens Federation pointed to the fact that 'we cannot recognize brave women, particularly of different ethnicity', you heard him, right? Oh, sure you did. That fairy-tale abduction had been a 'hot' topic after all. So, immediately after, when Meghna Guhathakurta also mentioned in her essay (Cultural Dynamics Journal) of what she had traced in Kalpana's daily notebook: "Despite the fact that women constitute half the population, they are not taken seriously in any movement for social change", you couldn't miss that; and you didn't, right?

Am I musing of stories too old? And you want me to get back to the reality of present times (after all, *ke hai, hriday khure, bedona jagate bhalobashe*, right)? Okay then, let's talk about 28 February 2010, when Shahidul Alam, our eminent photojournalist noted: "The need to protect a nation's borders cannot justify the forced eviction of people from their ancestral land". And, I know, you didn't miss this one either.

Do you mind if I take you back just a little, to 6 December

2007? A Daily Star ed, and this time a man-with-a-sword-resorting-to-pen-at-last, Brigadier (ret'd) Shahedul Anam Khan avers: "Any review (of the peace treaty) can be justified only after concrete actions to implement all the provisions of the accord are seen to have been taken". You felt he was really being honest in saying so, didn't you?

And if you cared three years before, you could care no less in 2010 when The Daily Star on March 18 published Air Commodore (ret'd) Ishfaq Ilahi Chowdhury. Another security-strategist keen about 'Righting a Historic Wrong', he declared: "We cannot allow the indigenous culture and civilization to be inundated by the onslaught of the majority Bengali culture, just like we do not want our Bengali culture to be swept away by the onslaught of Indian or English culture".



Finally, one more snapshot. 2003. Prof Amena Mohsin in her essay (MIT Press) describes how she was confronted by a senior 'tribal' citizen in CHT who asked her: "Why do you Bengalis call us upa-jati (meaning 'sub-nation'), when we have a language, culture, religion and land of our own; we may be few in number but we are not sub of any group. We may be a small nation but not a sub-nation". And on that occasion, just like the rest of you, I was also greatly moved (beside the truth of the words, Prof. Mohsin has been my teacher in the dept. of IR at DU), and felt 'concerned'.

So, there we were, caring so much about our people and their plight in the south-eastern part of our country, never forgetting the fact that it occupied some one-tenth of the country's land mass, and with the leaders holding in their hands a peace treaty full of promises, yet with nothing more than political rhetoric and

an unfortunate 'Dhire Cholo' strategy. To me, this is precisely the reason which will force the readers of this latest Dristipat effort, with all its communicative essays (though none of them are 'fresh' new) and expressive photographs and a near-perfect black and white combination to feel betrayed and to some extent enraged over our own lack of actions and even lesser sincere desire to address the issues of CHT which have been worsening over a decade.

But let the cynicism pass. The publication has been very well-timed, so to speak, especially when you remember the violent outbreak of hostilities in some areas of CHT this February. Also true is that it is gradually emerging in the national consciousness that a thirteen-year old peace accord has not been implemented, and the indigenous people are still at extreme risk of marginalisation. Also, amid the latest euphoria on the annulment of the 5th and 7th amendments to the constitution and a greater sense of 'national purity' (assuming that the media 'truly' represent what people feel), there are people who are sensible enough to comprehend the fallibility of a nation-state solution (be it Bengali or Bangladeshi) for the CHT.

What do you think about the likely effect of such positive and collective efforts on society? In bundling this anthology, as Dristipat mentions, they want 'to see the Hills fully integrated into Bangladesh, while MJE their partner organization, goes a step ahead in hoping that 'this project will help restart dialogue regarding the ongoing problems of Hill Tracts'. You might want to side with Naeem Mohaimen, the editor, who kept it rather simple, and in that way, achievable. He seeks to draw the line between 'the stories we grew up with' and 'the reality of the Jumma (pahar) people's resistance movement'.

Surely that is where you will have to be appreciative of this scholastic effort reflecting sincere concerns by these courageous people from our society. It might also remind you of the 1 September Daily Star post-ed (thanks to Syed Badrul Ahsan) which notes: "No happiness can be greater for a society of decent men and women than an acknowledgement of past villainy and, through that acknowledgement, a wiping out of that villainy from our books, from our hearts, from the deepest recesses of our souls". Equally you will remember what Ishfaq Ilahi wrote in Daily Star on 18 March this year (the essay is included in this Dristipat collection): "A little generosity by the majority community would go a long way towards healing the wound that had been festering for three decades."

Ah, there it hunts you back and forth. You do know, and you sure care, but it gets so difficult to rise to the call of duty. There is the rub, you see, time for your Hamlet being. Indeed, to be, or not to be, that is the million-dollar question!

These days my eyes look for bells and watches, not sure why. A giant Mecca tower hangs a massive clock over the Ka'aba, the 'centre of the world'. In Sylhet, here in Bangladesh, the city authorities recently repaired and re-launched its historical clock on the banks of River Surma. A week before, I re-read Hemingway's 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'. And while I leave you today, I might leave you with one or two lines from the many beautiful articles from 'Between Ashes and Hope'. But as I said, it is difficult to count on the power of the pen these days. So, on second thought, I shall end with how Hemingway began his Spanish War novel (he quoted John Donne in his prologue): "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".

Helal Mohammed Khan is a freelance writer. E-mail: helalmoammedkhan@gmail.com

# The Chair

BUDDHADEV GUHA

Translated from Bengali by SHAMSAD MORTUZA

How could you make handles like these?

Sir?  
What's the deal with this 'sir' business of yours? Can't you see how fat I have become? Do you think I can sit with my legs clung to each other for ten straight hours!

No, Sir!  
You guys lack common sense, which by the way has become so uncommon.

Sir!  
If these handles were a bit slimmer, I would have been able to stretch out a bit. That's what I have been trying to tell you.

Sir! The carpenter's wife has been suffering from some sort of girly sickness. He is off to Diamond Harbor ... on leave for the last fifteen days.

Let him go to hell! This is not a job for old haggards anyway. Do you know that three-fourths of a working man's life are spent in his office chair? Is it too much to ask for a boss to ask for a comfortable chair?

Sir, I will return in another two weeks, and cut these handles down to size.

Thank you. You don't have toby that time fungi will grow in my crotch. Please leave.

Sir!  
Haripad!  
Big Boss presses his calling bell. Haripad appears.  
What's the deal with you guys?

Sir?  
What 'Sir'? For how many days do you think I need to strive for a single chair? The chair for an officer is everything. He does things sitting in his chair, and if that chair is not okay nothing is okay. You can't even fix that chair. See...

As Big Boss tries to sit in his chair, one of the chromium plated wheels rolls away and he falls out of balance.  
Goodness me!

He springs to his feet.  
Haripad does the same. Everyone in the office knows Haripad as the shadow of Big Boss. Haripad jumps when his boss is jumpy, Haripad cries when his boss is sad, Haripad laughs when his boss is happy. Haripad wears safari suits just as many other big officers do in the office. They would have done what Haripad has just done; it is their duty to tune themselves to the whims of Big Boss. But Haripad is an artist in the art of flattery. Big Boss knows it all too well; yet he enjoys falling prey to the flattery.

Even God demands flattery; and he is just a big boss of an office.

For the last one year, Big Boss has been trying to get a comfy chair that suits him.

These Nilubabu-Filubabus of yours are worthless! They don't even know what they are selling. If the producer doesn't know his product, he is going to be alienated. That is why Bengalis never succeed in business. The owner and his salesmen are full of airs while the workers are gone to Diamond Harbor.

Haripad!  
Sir.

Is there any Chinese carpenter around?  
There are some in Teritybazar.

Call Mrs. Sen, and ask her to send an orderly from our Park Street branch to get some brochures for chairs. Go to the Chinese market as well. See if you can find me a decent chair. A company that cannot give a solid chair to his top man is bound to go bankrupt.

Big Boss reaches for the red light button, meaning no one was allowed in anymore. He is very upset. The chair keeps on leaning to its right whenever he tries sitting in it. After all, he is a leftist intellectual. What will people say if they see him tilting to the right? Disgraceful!

Within an hour, Haripad enters with a bunch of brochures for executive chairs. Some of the chairs are as big as thrones. Even by sitting on the front of them might give you the feeling of being a pigmy. That's the problem with modern management systems --- the lesser the internal material, the bigger the external chair. Big Boss is a plump man, and if he sits in one of those he surely will be lost. There is no way he is going to get one of those chairs in the flyers.

Haripad! Get the Chinese carpenter.

The Chinese carpenter shows up in an hour, and he measures up the vital statistics of Big Boss like a seasoned tailor. Big Boss instructs Mr. Chung Fing to make such a chair that will give him comfort for the next eight years. Mr. Chung Fing thanks him and leaves.

The date of the arrival of the chair comes. Big Boss thinks of the chair while shaving. His thrill is akin to the excitement of going for a tryst.

On his way to his room, he orders his secretary, Mrs. Sen, to attend to the Bihari clients with whom he has a meeting in the conference room at 11 am.

Give them something to eat or drink and keep them busy for a while. I might be a little late.

He enters his room. There it is: his chair with foam and leather upholstery in faded yellow that reminds one of autumnal leaves.

The chromium-plated wheels roll nicely. The back of the revolving chair swings back and forth quite smoothly too. He just needs to sit in it and feel its comfort.

The intercom buzzes at the wrong time.

Shut up! No call for me for the next half an hour not even internal calls!

He orders his staff.

He looks at the chair as if it is his newly-wedded wife. He stands in front of it and gives it a formal salute before turning his back to adjust his huge anterior to the posture of the chair; he attempts to plunge into his chair just as ducks do in water.

Stuck, Big Boss gets stuck! The Chinese chair clings to him like an octopus. This must be a conspiracy of Mr. Chung Fing. He frantically reaches for the calling bell.

Haripad storms in.

Pull me out.

Sir?  
Pull me out. I am stuck in the chair. H-a-r-i-p-a-d.

The lanky man tries his best, but in vain. Big Boss is absolutely stuck. His face has turned pale as white paper. There is no way he can be pulled out.

Turn the chair, make it face the window.

The boss calmly orders Haripada, and Haripad obliges. The revolving chair moves rather easily.

Leave me now, Haripad. Don't say a word to anyone.

Sir?  
Don't tell anyone that I am stuck in my chair.

No, sir.

Big Boss looks out of the window. The air-conditioner is humming. Down at Camac Street, a trail of cars is wheeling by. The company is quite big, involved in the export of iron, steel, tea, marbles and what not. His salary is quite fat, too. Besides, there are many perks: commissions, visits, treats, fees, extras here and there every sticky business, indeed.

The cry of the kite flying above the sky cannot reach the office room. The sky of Calcutta is still blue; only people do not have time to see it.

What could possibly have gone wrong? He personally made sure that the chair was tailored to his size and customised to his taste.

He probably has thought of himself as being much bigger than the chair.

Dr. Shamsad Mortuza is associate professor, Department of English, Jahangirnagar University. This story has been translated from Buddhaudev Guha's 'Maap'