

## REFLECTIONS

## Reading Saramago . . . and of him

FARIDA SHAIKH

I read Saramago. The more I read Saramago the more I misunderstood, or did I understand his clarity of thoughts? I don't know. I realized that I was caught up, snarled, totally tangled, muddled up and confused. What was Saramago writing about? I read the big names in literature, Borges, Camus, Coetzee, Handke, Hrabal, Kafka, Schulz, Wyndham and Wells, with whom he is often compared. But then, he is not one of them. Nobody possibly writes fantastic novels, in one page long sentences with unmarked quotation for dialogues! And say 'Perhaps it is the language that chooses the writers it needs, making use of them so that each might express a tiny part of what it is.'

Then, was I to do what I did? I got myself a copy of the book *Blindness* and heard a distant voice say: 'Go find your own Saramago.' So I read and re-read to realize and recognize some of Saramago's thoughts and heard him say: 'Human vocabulary is still not capable and probably never will be of knowing, recognizing and communicating everything that can be humanly experienced and felt.'

Saramago was a hardcore leftist all his life. 'I am a person with leftist convictions and always have been. I can't imagine myself outside any kind of social and political involvement. I am not a prophet, and the problem is that the right doesn't need any ideas to govern but the left can't govern without ideas.'

He was a communist, in 1969, at a time when the communist party was forbidden in Portugal under the military dictatorship. The country was taking orders directly from the USSR which wanted to make Portugal the Cuba of Europe. 'Beginning with adolescence, my political formation was oriented in the ideological direction of Marxism. It was natural, being that my thinking was influenced by an atmosphere of active critical resistance. That was the way it was during all the dictatorship and up to the revolution of 1974.' He notes that 'we are not short of movement proclaiming that a different world is possible, but unless we can co-ordinate them into an international movement, capitalism just laughs at all these organizations.'

In a summary statement, Saramago says: 'People live with the illusion that we have a democratic system, but it is only the outer form of one. In reality we live in a plutocracy, a government of the rich.' And in each of the South Asian countries do we find this example over and over again. On the election system his astute observation is: 'Abstention means you stayed at home or went to the beach. By casting a blank vote, you are saying you have a political conscience but you don't agree with any of the existing parties.' This is nearly what many of us feel! Further, 'it is difficult to understand that these people who democratically take part in elections and a referendum but are then incapable of democratically accepting the will of the people.' And this is happening all the time.

Because of his political engagement Saramago is compared to Orwell, and in much the same way sees present



day globalization as the modern image of the past mighty empire. He asserts: 'The painter paints, the musician makes music, the novelist writes novels. But I believe that we all have some influence not because of the fact that one is an artist, but because we are citizens.' Moreover, 'as citizens we all have an obligation to intervene and become involved; it's the citizen who changes things.'

Elaborating the global situation, this is what he says: 'It is economic power that determines political power and governments become the political functionaries of economic power. The world had already changed before September 11. The world had been going through a process over the last twenty or thirty years. A civilization ends, another one begins.'

Specifically on people he says: 'Americans have discovered the fragility of life, that ominous fragility that the rest of the world has either already experienced or is experiencing now with terrible intensity.' Furthermore, 'the attitude of insolent haughtiness is characteristic of the relationship Americans form with what is alien to them, with others.'

Related to power and politics Saramago asks, 'Can you imagine what Bush would say if someone like Hugo Chavez asked him for a little piece of land to install a military base, and he only wanted to plant a Venezuelan flag there? And things will be very bad for Latin America. You only have to consider the ambition and the doctrines of the empire which regard this region as its backyard.' In 2002, after meeting Yasser Arafat, Saramago declared: 'What is happening in Palestine is a crime which we can put on the same plane as what happened at Auschwitz.'

On current global conditions, it is his view that 'the world is governed by institutions that are not democratic: the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO.' Saramago's *Seeing* was the greatest condemnation of the power of the state. Saramago noted the domination by American militarism:

'The US needs to control the Middle East, the gateway to Asia. It already has military installations in Uzbekistan.' He continues: 'I have always asked two questions: How many countries have military bases in the United States? And in how many countries does the United States not have military bases?'

Saramago's ideas on social change and social control are: 'Society has to change, but the political powers we have at the moment are not enough to effect this change. The whole democratic system would have to be rethought.'

On human relationships, Saramago states: 'This is how everyone has to begin, men who have never known a woman, women who have never known a man, until the day comes for the one who knows, to teach the one who does not.' And 'a human being is a being who is constantly "under construction" but also in a parallel fashion always in a state of constant destruction.'

Saramago began work in a publishing house, Estudios Cor, as production manager, and not as an author, in 1950. He became friends with Portuguese writers. He took to translation work, of Colette, Cassou, Maupassant, Bonnard, Tolstoy, Hegel and others, which he enjoyed.

He lost his job as deputy editor of Lisbon *Diário de Notícias* '... without the faintest possibility of finding a job, I decided to devote myself to literature. It was about time to find out what I was worth as a writer. Being fired was the best luck of my life as a writer. The period that I could consider the most important in my literary work came about beginning with the revolution, and in a certain way, developed as a consequence of the revolution. But it was also a result of the counter revolutionary coup of November 1975.' He became a full time writer 1979, adding 'I do not just write, I write what I am. If there is a secret, perhaps that is it.'

'The possibility of the impossible, dreams and illusions,



are the subject of my novels.' Furthermore, 'a novel is not so much a literary genera but a literary space, like a sea that is filled by many rivers.' Saramago, writing in the Portuguese language, combines myth, history and surrealistic imagination in his work. 'I am a better novelist than a poet, playwright or essayist.' With more qualification the writer adds, 'In effect I am not a novelist, but rather a failed essayist who started to write novels because he didn't know how to write essays.' On characterization he says: 'I never appreciated positive heroes in literature. They are almost always clichés, copies of copies, until the model is exhausted. I prefer perplexity, doubt uncertainty, not just because it provides a more "productive" literary raw material but because that is the way we humans really are.'

The writer was born in 1922 into a poor peasant family in Azinhaga, a Portuguese village. Saramago, meaning a wild herbaceous plant, was accidentally incorporated into his name at the time of his birth registration. At age twelve he moved into a technical school.

Saramago achieved widespread recognition in 1988, at age 60, with the English translation by Giovanni Pontiero of *Memorial de Covento as Baltasar and Blinda*, a work that 'made me fall in love with him,' says a reader. *Tale of the Unknown Island* is yet another short beautiful love story.

The publication of *O Evangel no Segundo Jesus Christo*, as *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991), presenting Jesus as a fallible human being, offended the Catholic community of the country. When the government officially banned the book and did not allow it to be entered for the European Literary Prize, Saramago left Portugal and settled in the Spanish island of Lanzarote with his journalist wife Pilar del Rio.

Saramago won the Nobel Prize 1998. 'I am the same person I was before receiving the Nobel Prize. I work with the same regularity. I have not modified my habits; I have the same friends', he made it a point to let you know.

In his last book, *Cain 2011*, Saramago presents us with his vision of the New Testament. He comes back to the first book of the Bible, a new tale out of a story we all know. It is described as an ironic satirical journey that depicts an involuntary battle between the Creator and his creature.

*Journey to Portugal* is a marvellous memoir. It is a non-fiction in straightforward narrative. Margaret Jull Coasta, in translating his work, *The Cave*, said: 'One wonders how Saramago can penetrate so deeply into the heart of a man, a woman, a family.'

Saramago died on 18 June 2010, aged 87. His funeral was in the presence of 20,000 people. His body was cremated and the ashes sent to his birthplace. 'I cried when I heard he died. I don't care what his politics were. I feel privileged merely to have lived on the same planet as Saramago.' That was how a reader grieved.

Farida Shaikh Is A Sociologist And Writer Of Non-fiction .

## POETRY

## Tinsel Night

AINON M

In radiance of blue  
The flurries dance  
Stars descend  
In arms of quiet wind  
Falling on earth  
To softness of white dust  
The night glows

By frosted window  
Sits the ballad of silence  
Unyielding  
The distant angry bay  
Now of one color  
Wears silver streaks  
Elegant as the gods  
Frozen in nature

A shadow  
In stillness and quiet  
By the warmth of fire  
Enchanted by magical beauty  
Becomes conscious of a prelude  
To dreams and tranquility  
Ocean blue fills her eyes  
The alizarin crimson concept  
Wanders nowhere

Delightful oddities  
The crescent moon  
Camouflaged, archaic

AINON M WRITES FROM CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, USA.

## The Journey Within

FAHIM MURSHED

In silence I begin  
The greatest journey of them all  
It is the journey within  
Beyond time space and call

Limitless peace  
Showers of bliss  
Wash me free  
Who am I really?

I am the one  
Whose time has come  
To dig deep inside  
And nothing is left to hide

What great joy to be free  
It is a pleasure to be me  
I am not the body nor the mind  
We are souls beyond birth death time

Open your eyes, take off your veil  
At the end only truth will prevail  
It is nature, it is you and me  
We are all one, we are all energy

In silence I begin  
A journey like none other  
It is the journey within  
Beyond stars moon and sun.

## FICTION

## The Golden Deer

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Translation MOHIT UL ALAM

CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK

With the month of Ashwin, the time for the festival of Mother Durga arrived. From the fourth day boats from far and away were arriving at the river port of the village. People, who worked in other places, were returning home. In their baskets there were gourds, pumpkins, dry coconuts; in their tin boxes they brought shoes, umbrellas and clothes for their sons, and for their beloved wives perfume, soap, new story books and scented coconut oil.

Like the upcoming merry festival, the sunshine of the month of Sarat spread all over in the clear sky; the nearly ripe rice plants were trembling in the breeze; the monsoon-washed leaves of the trees were shivering in the new cold wind blowing on the onset of winter and wearing homespun China coat, sporting well-folded shawls on their shoulders, holding umbrellas over their heads, the people were returning to their homes by a shortcut through the fields.

Watching these home-coming people from his verandah, Baidyanath couldn't but suppress a deep sigh that wrung out of his heart. Comparing his joyless house with thousands of gleeful houses in the Bengal, he thought to himself, "Why has God created me such useless?"

His sons woke up at dawn and rushed to Adyanath's house to see the making of the idol of the goddess by the potter at the yard. At the mealtime when the housemaid had to capture the children to drag them home, Baidyanath was ruminating over his futile life in the midst of this bustling festive world. Rescuing the boys from the housemaid, he sat them on his lap, and drawing the elder one close to him, said, "Okay Obu, what do you want to have for this Puja?"

Obinash replied instantly, "Give me a boat, father." The younger one thought, it was useless to be less than his brother in anything. So he said, "Give me a boat too, father."

Like father like son! They don't want anything else if they get some useless art work to accomplish. The father said, "Okay."

In the meantime an uncle of Mokshada had returned from Kashi on his yearly visit during the Puja holidays. He was a leader by profession. For sometime, Mokshada was seen visiting him frequently in his house.

At last, one day, she came over to her husband and said, "Dear, you have to go to Kashi."

For a moment Baidyanath thought perhaps she had found out from some astrologer that his death was near and she was, therefore, keen on providing him the last rite of absolution.

Later on he came to know about the rumour of a certain house in Kashi under which a hidden treasure was to be found, and he had to buy that house in order to retrieve the treasure.

Baidyanath said, "Holy God, I can't go to Kashi." Baidyanath had never gone anywhere out of his house. But the ancient pundits had long ago written about the remarkable 'uneducated' skills of the wives in sending their hibernating husbands away from homes. Mokshada could

of course have burnt the house to cinders with her words, at which the unfortunate Baidyanath would only have awashed himself in tears but would have never mentioned of going to Kashi.

Two or three days passed. Baidyanath spent his time laboring after chiseling and spiking and joining some pieces of wood into making two toy boats. He set a mast on them, put up the sail, hoisted the flag, and fixed the steering pole and oars on them. Puppet boatmen and passengers were also fitted into them. In fact, he expressed much innovation and wonderful skills in the making of the boats. Seeing those boats that a young boy wouldn't be stirred to excitement was rare to see nowadays. So when Baidyanath handed over the boats to his sons into the seventh day of the festival, they jumped up in joy. Where the mere hulk of the boats would have sent them to cloud nine, there in that place like bonus came mast, sail, oars, boatmen and passengers they were simply awed by such decorations.

Attracted by their noise, Mokshada walked in to see the Puja gift of the poor father to his sons.

The moment she saw the toys she flew into a rage, gave out a shriek, slapped her forehead and grabbed the toys and threw them out of the window. Oh God, she wailed, let alone a gold chain, or silk shirts, or even embroidered caps, nothing of the sorts, and the unfortunate father had finally decided to cheat on his own sons by gifting two toy boats, and that also not spending two paisa to buy them, but making them himself!

The youngest boy started crying at the top of his voice. Calling him an idiot boy, Mokshada gave him a resounding slap on the cheek.

Having a look at the face of his father, the eldest son forgot his own grief. Pretending to be unperturbed, he said, "Father, don't worry, I'll retrieve them tomorrow early morning."

And on the very following morning, Baidyanath agreed to set out for Kashi. But where is the money to come from? His wife sold her gold to get the money. The gold jewellery was ancestral assets coming down from Baidyanath's grandmother's time, and such pure and heavy gold was not easily found at the present time.

Baidyanath felt as if he was taking this journey to die. Taking the boys on the lap a few times, kissing them farewell, he finally left his house in tearful eyes. Then Mokshada also started crying.

The owner of the house at Kashi was Mokshada's uncle's client. Probably for that reason the house was sold at a much higher price. Baidyanath took possession of the house as the sole owner. The house was on the very bank of the river. The river flowed washing at its foundation.

As the night descended Baidyanath felt cowed by a creeping sensation. In the empty house he lay alone wrapping himself up from head to foot in a chadar (bedsheet), and kept a candle burning by the bed near his head.

But sleep was not coming to him. At the deep of the night when all sounds stopped altogether, Baidyanath was suddenly startled by a metallic sound coming from somewhere. It was a mild but clear sound, as if the treasurer of the

king of slaughter was sitting in the underworld and counting his coins.

Though much scared, Baidyanath became curious too, and an invincible sense of hope filled up his mind. He took up the candle in his trembling hand and searched the house room by room. If he came to this room, it seemed as if the sound was coming from another room, and if he went to that room, the sound then seemed to be coming from yet another room. All night Baidyanath had only walked from this room to that room. At daytime the earth-shaking sound got mixed up with other sounds and couldn't be identified separately.

When the night was into its second or third phase, and the world went to sleep, that sound again recurred.

Baidyanath felt extremely restless. Tracking the sound, which way he should go he couldn't yet decide. It was like the sound of water coming from the midst of a desert, but from which direction there was no way to know! He was afraid too lest he took a wrong step and the stream of the hidden treasure got lost forever. Baidyanath's condition was like that thirsty traveler who stands still with sharp ears to locate the source of water, while his thirst goes on increasing.

Many days passed in great uncertainty. Only insomnia and false hopes wrought sharp lines of anxiety on his otherwise calm face. His eyes in their sockets from time to time in a restless look expressed the burnt heat of the sandy desert.

At last one day at noontime he closed all the doors of the house and started tapping on the floor with a pickaxe. In a small adjacent room at a certain spot the sound from the floor echoed back empty.

In the deep of the night Baidyanath started digging the floor at the chosen spot all by himself, which got completed when it was almost dawn.

Baidyanath discerned some kind of a room underneath but he didn't dare step into it as it was still dark. He rather laid his bed on the face of the hole and slept on it. But the sound grew so persistently clear that he left the bed in fear though yet he couldn't think it wise to leave the house unguarded. Both fear and greed pulled him apart from opposite directions, and thus the night passed by.

Today the sound could be heard even at daytime. He didn't allow the servant to enter the house but took his meals outside at the verandah. After eating, he entered the house and locked up the door from inside.

Chanting Goddess Durga's name he removed the bed from the top of the hole. The water beneath squabbled and the metallic sounds of something could be clearly heard.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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## CLARIFICATION

In the article, *Elias, Bankim* --- and perspectives (by Akram Hosen Mamun) last week, reference to the website from where information was obtained was not mentioned. The error is regretted. The website was [www.bangladeshinovels.com](http://www.bangladeshinovels.com)

Literary Editor