

TURNING THE PAGES

The Reading Circle . . . five years on

NIAZ ZAMAN

The Reading Circle is only five years old. It first met at Words 'n Pages on February 20, 2006 with just three members: Farida S. Enayet, Nasreen Kabir, and Niaz Zaman. In these few years its members have read 60 books. Of course not all of them read all the books and they were not always present at the second meeting there were only two but together, as a group, TRC can be proud to say that its members have read so many books for pleasure. This would not have been possible if TRC did not have dedicated readers, supportive book stores and coffee houses, quality Bangladeshi publishers and perhaps, most importantly, the support of institutions like Independent University, Bangladesh, the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, and the Goethe Institut. There are other book reading groups in Dhaka, but I do not know whether they have met as consistently.

Since that first meeting in February 2006, the TRC has met regularly once a month. There are no office-bearers though there is a liaison person and no membership fees. Anyone interested in reading a good book is welcome to attend. Books are chosen by mutual consent.

Because TRC wanted to read books that were readily available, the first choice was Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*, the writer's own translation of *Lal Salu*. *Tree Without Roots* had been published just a few months ago in August 2005 by writers.ink. The three books read subsequently were also published by writers.ink: Syed Waliullah's *Night of No Moon*, translated by Afia Dil, *Bengal Raag* by Durdana Soomro and Ghazala Hameed, and *Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh*, edited by Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman. In a way this marked the beginning of the association of TRC with publishers such as writers.ink initially and subsequently with The University Press Ltd. and laterly, to a lesser extent, with Adorn. One of the reasons for this is that locally printed books are easily available and, moreover, at a discount.

The day TRC discussed *Galpa*, we also discussed *Three Girls* by Carl Bloom. Bloom, an American academic, was then located in Dhaka and had self-published his novel. Up to now TRC had read only novels, but with *Politically Incorrect Poems* by Nadeem Rahman, TRC branched out into the genre of poetry. *Politically Incorrect Poems* was also published by a local publisher, Academic Publishers

and Library Ltd. Shawkat Osman's *Laughter of a Slave*, translated by Professor Kabir Chowdhury, one of our later books, was published by Adorn.

Over the years TRC members have read a wide variety of books written by authors ranging from America to Brazil, China to Turkey, Hungary to Columbia, and published by international publishers: *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *The Zahir* by Paul Coelho, *Birds Without Wings* by Louis De Bernieres, *The Collector's Wife* by Mitra Phukan, *My Name is Red* by Orhan Pamuk, *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry, *Fire of Bengal* by Rózsa Hajnóczy, translated by Éva Wimmer and David Grant, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple etc.

While the choice of books ranges freely the only criterion being it should be a good book The Reading Circle attempts to choose some books related to special events. Thus in February we try to read books by Bangladeshi writers, in Bangla or in English translation as we have foreign members as well who do not know Bangla. In March we try to read a book by a woman writer or a book related to the Liberation War which we also do in December. Similarly, in May, we read a book by Tagore, either in the original or in English translation.

We have had a number of problems. For example, when we were scheduled to do *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, copies did not reach till much afterwards. Nevertheless, the two members who had read the book gave the rest of us enough sense of the book to want to read it. Sometimes the books chosen were too difficult or slow-moving. Though we would like to expand our authors, it is difficult to get enough copies if the books have not been published in India or Bangladesh. Sometimes we knew we could not get enough copies of the book chosen, so agreed to discuss the author, leaving the choice of book to the members. Some very interesting discussions took place in this way, for example, on Khushwant Singh when different books were discussed by different members, and one member who had met the author narrated her experiences.

We have also had a problem about venue. Initially, we met at Words 'n Pages; for the last one and a half years, since May 19, 2009, we have been meeting at Radius Centre. The books we read while we were meeting at Words 'n Pages show a wide range of writers from different

continents, Nobel Prize winners, Booker Prize winners or those shortlisted for prizes. Though we are fortunate enough to be able to meet at Radius Centre and though we have read some excellent books at the new venue Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies*, Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora*, translated by Radha Chakravarty, Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Mani Sankar's *Chowringhee*, and Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* there is a problem. Because Radius Centre is not a book store, and because we no longer have the support of a book store, many of the books chosen have been prescribed university texts, such as Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, photocopies of books, or books that are easily available not because they are necessarily the best that could have been chosen. TRC has not yet solved the problem of books, though in the partnerships which it has started some of this difficulty will be removed except that the choice of books will then depend greatly on the partner institution. For example, the Goethe Institut recently gave TRC several copies of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* to be discussed in March.

We have been fortunate to have writers and translators read from their writings at our meetings. Shazia Omar was present on the occasion of the TRC reading of her book *Like a Diamond in the Sky*. Dr Radha Chakravarty, who was in Dhaka for a few years, was also present on a number of occasions to discuss *Bodynaps*, her anthology of women's short stories and her translations of Tagore's *Gora* and *Shesher Kavita*. Foreign writers whose visits to Bangladesh have been initiated by TRC are Aruna Chakravarti, Amitav Ghosh, and Mani Sankar Mukherji. Aruna Chakravarti, well-known for her translation of Sunil Gangopadhyay's books, visited Dhaka on the occasion of the India Bangladesh Festival of Books and Writers organized among others by the Indian High Commission and Independent University, Bangladesh. Amitav Ghosh's visit was occasioned by our reading of *The Hungry Tide*. Subsequently, TRC members saw *The Bengal Tiger in the Sunderbans*, a documentary directed by Razia Quadir and also visited the Sunderbans with Amitav Ghosh.

Similarly, Mani Sankar Mukherji's visit to Bangladesh last year was initiated by TRC. As on previous occasions, Independent University, Bangladesh hosted him. Apart from a workshop with IUB students in the morning of October 22 and an open lecture later that evening on the

IUB campus, he attended a reception co-hosted by TRC and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre. On February 18, there was another joint event with the IGCC: a dramatized reading of Jasim Uddin's poem *Nakthar Math* or *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt*.

TRC had been toying with the idea of visiting the Kolkata Book Fair and reading at the prestigious Oxford Books on Park Street. This January a few members of TRC along with a few members of Gantha made the trip. At the book fair, TRC members narrated their experiences as members of a reading circle. The highlight of the evening was the presence of Mani Sankar Mukherji, who spoke to the gathering, stressing the importance of readers for every writer. On January 28, Oxford Books co-hosted an evening for TRC with the International Book Club. Apart from briefly telling the audience which included among others, Bhaskar and Amita Mitter and Ruby Pal Choudhury about TRC and the books we have read, we also had some members read from books published in Bangladesh: Salma Karim, Shahrukh Rahman, Raana Haider, and Jackie Kabir. Noorjahan Bose, a member of Gantha, read an excerpt from her memoir *Agunmukhar Meye*.

Reading is a solitary occupation, which threatens to become even more solitary with the emergence of e-books and e-book readers. But, for our generation, there is still nothing like the pleasure of books, of book fairs where there is scope for readers and writers to meet, and literary festivals where new authors can brush shoulders with older ones and meet their readers face to face, and, above all, book stores which provide space not only for books but also for readers. During his visit to Dhaka, Amitav Ghosh commended the relationship that Words 'n Pages then had with The Reading Circle. What could be better for a writer than to have dedicated readers and a book store that stocks his/her books and encourages the reading of those books by launching new books and hosting book clubs?

Despite all the difficulties in getting books, problems with venue and traffic jams, TRC has survived. We couldn't have done so without the determination of our members and the generous support we have received from individuals and institutions. But I do not know how much longer we can really continue if book stores with space large enough for reading addas cease to exist.

Prof. Niaz Zaman is one of the founding members of The Reading Circle.

LITERARY NOTES

Rediscovering Tagore through creative writing

SABREENA AHMED

"Tagore is all encompassing by himself", commented Julia Bell, the instructor of the creative writing workshop organised by British Council Bangladesh. This workshop was held from February 9-10 as a part of the four-month long Tagore festival "Noborup Rabindrantha 2011" or "Rediscovering Tagore". The festival was organised by the British Council to celebrate Tagore's 150th birth anniversary aiming at drawing the young generation closer to the works of the Nobel laureate.

This two-day workshop revolves around the theme of "Crossing Boundaries", a notion close to Tagore's heart. Tagore always tried to find universalism in nations around the world. He dreamt of a world without borders where every country would know about one another's culture and be inspired. Julia Bell, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Birkbeck University, London, was invited by the organisers to conduct the workshop in Dhaka. The workshop comprised fifteen Bangladeshi emerging writers in English, who had been selected on the basis of their sample short stories.

Bell shared poems of Tagore from "I Won't Let You Go", a collection of poems translated by Ketaki Kushari Dyson, for the workshop. She showed how different points of view can have different effects on readers. A writer should choose the point of view of his writing carefully. She added that her first novel *Massive* and second novel *Dirty Work* were written in first person narrative, which is really challenging to sustain throughout the writing. Her third novel *Wise Up* was written from a third person point of view. The bestselling Creative Writing Coursebook, written and co-edited by this facilitator, is used in many universities of the UK as the main course book.

The second day of the workshop mainly focused on how ideas of one language and culture can be interpreted and



translated through a second language. Bell pointed to the fact that Tagore's thoughts were interpreted and translated through rightly chosen words in his works. An avid reader of Tagore would definitely notice his growth as a writer from a young to a mature artist through a perusal of his earlier works in juxtaposition with his later creations. The workshop participants explored the techniques of translating cultural nuances of Bangla into English and found that if a translator tries to translate the words directly or add long explanations after it, the whole piece of translation would be stiff and prosaic. English is a very flexible language that accommodates words from other languages easily. So writers can incorporate words related to Bangla culture easily into the English translation. Nowadays, the

trend of using footnotes in translated texts is not encouraged so that readers are inspired to find out the meaning themselves.

The issue of getting published as English writers in Bangladesh was the main topic of discussion at the final session of the workshop. Only translation of Bangladeshi literature into English and more of English creative writing from here can promote this country's literature before the world. Bell mentioned that in the UK any writer needs to get an agent in order to be published. Otherwise, the writer can self-publish his book. She told the participants how she began to write regularly by being a member of a small literary group named "Tindal Street" in the earlier stages of her career. The group consisted of a few friends who wrote and critiqued each other's works. Later on, they brought

out the first compilation of the short stories, *Hard Shoulders*, by themselves under the banner of Tindal Street Press. Bell encouraged all to be in any literary group that gives genuine feedback to the writers and try to publish a collection of literary pieces to let everyone know about their existence. Members of Writers Block and Brine Pickles, the two literary groups of Bangladeshi writers in English participating in the workshop, agreed that they had been benefiting from discussions of their own groups.

In the end, Bell gave some tips to the writers. She advised all to grow a habit of writing every day. The moments just after waking up in the morning are the best time to write because a person's mind remains fresh and free from all troubles of routine life. She also suggested that the dialogues in a short story or novel should not describe the plot but the emotions of the characters.

The other segments of the British Council's Tagore festival include a fashion show which is based on eight different themes of Tagore, such as how the characters of his novels used to dress and how this style has influenced modern Bangladeshi clothing. A hair stylist from the UK will work with the Bangladeshi designers on the final fashion show. The British Council has collaborated with Channel I to hold a competition of Tagore songs among young people. The finale will have British musician Soumik Datta collaborating with local artists. The last segment of the festival comprises an adaptation of Tagore's famous dance drama *Tasher Desh*, which was inspired by Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

It is indeed a remarkable festival organised by the British Council to relive the moments of Tagore's era through contemporary literature, fashion, drama and music that represents Tagore's universalism to the world.

Sabreena Ahmed is one of the participants of the workshop. She currently teaches at the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University.

POETRY

The Lover

JOY GOSWAMI

Translation IFFAT NAWAZ

The book you gave me once on clouds and thunder I opened it up today. When I turned the page I found it held water up to my waist
Then I turned the page where the waist deep water became part of a river

- curving far

The book you gave me to learn about plants I can't even place one step inside it, it's now a jungle. The trees are so tall that they won't even let sunlight

- reach the ground

The book you gave me to learn about fountains Today there is a gigantic waterfall throbbing vivaciously

- all day

Even the white feathered page marker you gave me The book I had kept it in, now there Hundreds of birds are flying, chirping, swimming

All the books that you had given me are now deserts and mountains
All books are sun, all books are horizon

But today happens to be the day when my friends are coming to see my library
To see my worth as a scholar, to see how much knowledge I hold! What will

I show them? With what shall I face them today?

NON-FICTION

New dad's baby blues

SUNANDA KABIR

In our country the first issue is a divine blessing to its parents. The baby brings a festive air from a hut in the slums to the castle. Relatives, friends and neighbours shower presents; food, laughter and jokes keep the environment of the house ever warm. The young mother with immense shyness and the granny with profound pride shows off the little prince to the visitors. But the centre of great attraction remains unconcerned, absolutely unaware of the grandeur! It's the day when a man should be over the moon. His friends and colleagues buy him sweets and cigars. His boss pats and says he expects great things of him as he's been more responsible.

But, besides happiness and joy, problems are not too rare! Motherhood in a woman's life in most cases is very wanted and desirable. In spite of immense responsibility and labour the glory and grace give the mother a special honour. But when a man becomes the father he is the odd man out! He doesn't get the same importance as before. Now his socks are missing, his purse is misplaced and special items are not available in the lunch box. His place is now occupied by a little angel about whom you dare not complain. Above all, at night dad's sleep gets frequently interrupted by the screams of the baby. In fact the whole environment of the house swings on the mood of it.

And yet if research is to be believed, the new dad is in

more danger of going off the track than at any other time in his life. When a man becomes a father for the first time, he's likely to go off the track, if he and his wife are not careful. Resentment and plain jealousy can occupy the dad for some time. To share the same bedroom with the yelling baby and his ever attending mom and go to work the next morning after spending a sleepless night makes life a hell for him.

"The father for the first time is more likely to go off the rails than at any other time in his life. Having a first baby is a traumatic time for a mother, but all the indications are that a father can be more dramatically affected," declares Dr. Joan Winterton, of New York's Parental Advisory Service.

The responsibilities may make him crazy. 'Sometimes the responsibility just makes him flip. Instead of taking things easily and consolidating his position he panics, takes on extra burdens at work to cover the extra expenses, and suffers from serious stress,' declares Dr. Winterton. If unplanned, the sudden responsibilities of the young dad may bring on a bad attack of marriage blues which can last long. The reality of having the second position to a baby often builds up to extreme resentment which may lead to an extra-marital affair on the part of the husband. Moreover, sexual problems at the postnatal stage are common. One young husband who underwent marriage counselling after the birth of

his child told Dr. Winterton: 'The kid took over the house and I got very bitter about it.'

Moreover, he's likely to fall out with his in-laws, particularly his mother-in-law, causing a rift which may take years to heal, if at all does.

Sometimes he shows his resentment by behaving as though he was a bachelor again! The husband should realise that his wife's life has been more restricted than his, but she does not make a fuss about it. On the other part, the wife should give as much attention to her spouse as possible, and should not allow the baby to completely monopolise her. But a man can overcome this situation and for him there are some suggestions from Christopher Clulow:

The husband should not take extra burden or change the job to earn more. It will add extra stress and responsibility which may jeopardise the situation.

Again, he should not be involved with another family to pass time or have an affair with another woman.

Better enjoy the growing up of the kid together with the wife. No doubt, eventually you'll feel great!

The bottom line comes from Dr. Winterton: 'Every baby's arrival makes a dad go a little mad for a while. Thank goodness, they don't actually have to give birth to the infants. I doubt whether the average dad would survive the first five minutes!'

Sunanda Kabir writes fiction and poetry.