

NOTES

Hamlet and Ophelia in Dhaka

MD. SHAFIQUL ISLAM

How do you celebrate the birthday of the greatest dramatist and playwright, William Shakespeare, that is? Joining up with a Bard birthday bash at Stratford-upon-Avon would be the best way to celebrate it. Since that is possible for only a few, others may choose to enjoy a play or read a sonnet or a long poem to get into the spirit.

There may be hundreds of ways to celebrate the Bard's birthday. William Shakespeare's 447th birthday was celebrated by the English and Humanities Department of University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh on April 24 with all spirit and sincerity. The evening programme featured an exhibition of pictures on the Bard's life and times, followed by a play 'Hamlet in Love', by Professor Mohit Ul Alam and directed by Tahmina Zaman.

The programme was inaugurated by Dr. Serajul Islam Choudhury, Professor Emeritus, University of Dhaka and attended by, among others, Professor Rafiqul Islam, VC, ULAB, and Kazi Shahed Ahmed, President, ULAB Governing Body. Professor Islam traced studies of the Bard in Bangla back to as many as two hundred years. Sree Girish Chandra Sen is the first known translator of Shakespeare in Bangla. Though more than one writer translated entire works of the Bard in Bangla and many scholars and avid readers memorized him in entirety, there is still a long way to go if we want to understand the spirit of his works. Dr. Rafiqul Islam noted how Shaheed Munier Chowdhury's rendering of Shakespeare's 'The Taming of The Shrew' into its Bangla version 'Mukhara Ramani Bashikaran' in pre-liberation days became popular on radio, television and stage. Kazi Shahed in his short speech remarked on the universality of Shakespeare in our society, making a pointed reference to

King Lear's frantic efforts to cling to power even after his abdication of it.

In an exuberant, impassioned and thought provoking speech, Dr. Serajul Islam Choudhury agreed with the speakers and emphasized the need for inculcating and nurturing the spirit embedded in the life and works of Shakespeare in our day to day life. He mentioned how Shakespeare rose to the heights of glory from an ordinary beginning as the keeper of horses of those who came to enjoy the plays. The Bard had to make great sacrifices for the welfare of his family, who were left in Stratford-upon-Avon. His daughters remained illiterate. The eminent academic voiced his concern over the dearth of high quality translations of Shakespeare in Bangla. Professor Choudhury emphasized the need for promoting the Shakespearean spirit in the interest of intellectual as well as moral uplift.

The second part of the program brought forth a lively and spirited presentation of Mohit Ul Alam's avant garde play 'Hamlet in Love'. Alam has skillfully invoked characters from Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies and histories, drawing them into a play in which all go through much travail and suspense before ending up as an entertaining comedy.

A synopsis of the plot runs thus: Hamlet and Ophelia are classmates, studying English at a private university in Dhaka. They also love each other deeply, so much so that Ophelia will leave her father's house if need be. But she says to Hamlet that her father, Mr. Polonius, a very rich man, the owner of Ophelia Constructions, has arranged her marriage with a suitable candidate living in America by the name of Cassio. She probably won't be able to defy her father.

Hamlet is a brilliant student in his discipline, but Ophelia's warning makes him desperate, and his friends Macbeth,

Antony, Iago and others craft out a plan to help Ophelia run away from her father's house, where she has been living a confined life. Rosalind, another classmate of Hamlet, becomes worried at seeing Hamlet lose his concentration on studies over his feelings for Ophelia. She wants to ask Hamlet to desist from chasing Ophelia, and tells him that their teacher, Mrs. Gertrude, is equally worried about Hamlet's falling grades.

However, Hamlet and his friends execute the elopement plan successfully in the middle of the night, and on the following morning, when Hamlet and Ophelia go to the Kazi's office to register their marriage, the officer in charge of Dhanmondi Thana turns up to arrest Hamlet on a charge of seduction and elopement filed by Mr. Polonius. In this riveting last scene, though, it emerges that Mr. Polonius has been willing to marry his daughter off to Hamlet; he only wanted to test the strength of their love. And so, along with his business partners, Richard Bolingbroke, King Richard III, and Prospero he devised a plan that would have the young couple prove their love in all earnestness. After the confusion is removed, the happy wedding takes place. A distribution of sweets among those present follows.

Zayed and Saima played the roles of 20th century versions of Hamlet and Ophelia who, with the support of their friends, could finally fulfill their love requited.

Zayed, Saima, Satyajit, Wafi and Sarwat are Dhakaians who are in contemporary attire, carry themselves like all other Bangladeshis but always remind us that Alam has instilled in them the original spirit of Shakespeare's characters.

Md. Shafiqul Islam, a senior civil servant, was a student of English literature at Dhaka University in the mid 1970s.

POETRY
As we walk the path

SANGITA AHMED

Sleep dearly, my love,
Paint your thoughts in hues of
Wild laughter, warm embrace,
passion and promises shared.

Fears of losing, tears of outrage
Precious gems from innermost core
Pain sanctified in purity
Of two pulses, beating in one rhythm

Sleep on, my love,
Let your soul soar high
In sheer madness of joy
Till euphoria frees our souls

Before reality hovers
Above our heights
To bring us down
To the abyss of life

But till then
Let love linger
In sensual surreal slowness
Savour fleeting eternities

Till then,
Let us feel, touch, revel
Let smiles, sadness, contentment
Merge as one
As we walk the path
That forks ahead.

Sangita Ahmed writes poetry and is a broadcaster

Rhapsody on an Agra night

KHONDAKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN

*At Agra did Shah Jahan
A stately marble dome decree
Where Jamuna the sacred river ran
Through meadows measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea...*

Sitting under a waning moon
on the parapet wall of Agra Grand Hotel,

I was trying to parody Coleridge's great poem
'Kubla Khan'.

Three nights had elapsed since 'Dol Purnima',
We hadn't seen the Taj yet.

(The sighting of it in full moon
would be 'na-mumkin' anyway.)

What if I were allowed near the Taj
on this hot night?

Would there be a "woman
wailing for her demon lover"?

We were holding scotch in our
hands, thanks to Dr Laal:

he had brought back this duty-free
'maal'

from Germany
and asked us to a boozing circuit.

Others were appreciating Bhagat
Singh's martyrdom on the docu-film
downstairs.

We chose to be Ghalib of glasses
instead.

Someone mused like Bahadur Shah
Zafar:

"Umre daraz maang ke layethi
chaar din;

Du arzoo mein kat gaye,
do intazaar mein!"

Faraway from martyrdoms and
wait, a mist of mystic *ihsas* formed
in one corner of the sky.

It soon condensed into a cloud,
then crystallized into a teardrop
on the cheek of Mumtaz.

Nobody saw it before Tagore did
-- he caught it in the web of his
white beard.

Salaam Gurudev!
You should have been here with us
tonight
sharing Ajeetji's hospitality!
And Dr Laal's!

Professor Khondakar Ashraf Hossain, noted
poet and literary critic, teaches English
literature at Dhaka University.

FICTION

'Do you feel it?'

FARIHA NAAZ SHAFI

Thunderclouds roared. People clustered under shopping mall entrances. The sky looked like a concentrated solution of clay particles. Under the monsoon sky, he was drenched. A combination of perspiration, rain and tears did that for him. Late afternoon isn't the appropriate time to visit a graveyard. But, he was there sitting cross-legged on the damp mud, before a tombstone. The name of the deceased, date of birth and death were engraved in pink marble. Pink. While lightning bursts into colourful contents and now and then people ran with polythene sheets covering their heads, he was numb. Maybe in his early thirties, with handsome features and striking blue eyes, his composure remained intact. It was raining cats and dogs. In the frenzy of a moment, out of the blue, he moved. From an army-green rucksack he took out three candles and a

chocolate cake. Then the guy, who looked almost paranoid, started decorating the cake with candles. The biggest yellow candle went to the middle and the others on the extreme left and right. The air around the graveyard smelled of chocolate bread. Many of the spirits might have come up from their individual graves and joined him in this celebration. It was her birthday. Birthday of a girl who has taught him to say his prayers. Made him hang himself with an electric fan. Loved him enough to make him live without her presence being felt. Cutting the cake, Arhan felt Zaira's hand grasping his. They were cutting the cake together. It was all the same. Like all the birthdays they had celebrated. All the songs he had written. All that the heart ached for. Feeling her so close, his heart skipped a beat. Exerted pressure on his chest. Made him want to vomit out the vomit-smell in his stomach. In a draughty time of the month, he started panting. The desire to be with her intoxicated his mind like cancer. He

couldn't take it. So, he started to dig her grave with his hands. Deep down Arhan knew it was a sin to do this, but his love made him remorseless. He dug and dug until his nimble fingers grew pink and the authorities tried taking him away. Fighting them off, fresh tears in his eyes, he barely managed to find a handful of soil. Arhan smeared it all over his body, trying to dissolve a painful hunger. As he was being bundled out of the graveyard on to the main road, he heard her voice in a babble. He was standing so close to her that he could almost feel her heart beat. So, with raised eyebrows she asked him: Do you feel it? "What"? Arhan was startled. "My heart beat, silly." "Oh, yes, it skipped." His heartbeat skipped too.

Fariha Naaz Shafi writes fiction.

LITERARY SEDUCTIONS

In search of bluebird

AINON N

The genesis of love remains a mystery. They say how, why, and when it happens no one knows. On the art and science of love Ontor solemnly declares it is an innocence bordering on naïve faith. Surely it is the half cognizant absences in life that lure leanings towards the other; no more, no less. One is compelled, fascinated, attracted by different aspects of more than one individual. Sometimes it is a sense of intellectual compatibility, sometimes of a verve that one notices which denotes the promise of excitement and stimulation! Such sparks cannot be love. Can it? Mentally she makes a note: it is good to remember that in the end we have only ourselves. The phone rings, putting an end to her cascade of contemplations. She is reluctant to converse with Neel. Who would say anything yet? Recently her fragmented thoughts could not find their way on paper. She hears herself say:

"How do you like the idea of interactive writing?"

"What writing?"

You know, a literary collaborative work, I write the other person responds and vice versa. Even better, we can become each other's Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin? Ah, the happy ride we could take, together, in closeness reminiscent of the stars, it would give new meaning to my life!"

What on earth was she saying? His long pause made her hopeful. Perhaps he will agree to push back the deadline, just by few more days?

"Ok, I know of someone who can work with you. He will be your Ai!"

With that he hung up, without nicety of details. Ten minutes later a filigree of words light up the screen of her work station. No name, no introductions, the unpardonable act.

"My search for you is essentially a striving for what goes on in your mind. What happens there, my friend?"

"To you here is my mind's crystal or cameo. Name it as you wish!"

I seek:
That color which can paint all that is
In my heart, but shape me not in a mold
The truth where wisdom is humble, silent
Life's heart that sanctifies grief and joy
Wonder of clumsiness where imperfect beauty abounds
To hear that racing heart when soul feels void of the one
Knowledge of freedom, as freedom itself is in chains
In silence, I seek life..."

"You look for colour which can paint all that is in your heart
and yet not shape you in a mould? But colour goes beyond
parameters, doesn't it?"

"The colour? Yes, indeed it does go beyond parameters. But as the colour gets captured on canvas the essence, the feelings of an artist come to an end, parameters get defined. I am in eternal need of the unknown colour. I find kindness colourful, truth colourful, the duality of tear and smile colourful, birth and death colourful, I find a beautiful mind colourful! It is the human essence. Or would you rather say to hold precious moments we are ever-in-need of that unknown colour which

has many forms: moments, expressions, temperaments, each captured within defined parameters and yet open to new horizons? In all this the heart cannot but throb, for to pause would be the death of all that is beautiful in life."

"Would you feel easy and comfortable if I addressed you as my soul-mate? Ah, but then, emotions will come into the picture. Let them. In this profound intellectual relationship, it will be an interplay of reason and emotion. To deny that will cause a conflagration in the soul, yours as well as mine. In this coming together, we are going for an assertion of ourselves, separately and in conjoined fashion."

Neel's solution of Ai? But who is this? Clearly he was calligraphy her opinions. She smiles and writes back, "Recall Pascal? He said, 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.' Ah...but he speaks of mind's reasoning of higher spirituality, where faith resides. For individuals like us who are slightly off on the continuum of sanity, I say the only way to endorse beauty is to temper reason with emotion! Does it sound unreasonable to you? Let it be so."

"By the way, what would you say to a thought borrowed from Neruda: I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees?"

"The reader in me says thus. Hold me in your belief. Fold me in your flow of life. But not do what he pronounces. There love and divinity come together as magnificent, pristine, singing and beautiful."

For me, savouring words establishes a violent intimacy to the reading process. As I wrap myself in lyrics, poems, books, literary writings, the words stand at the periphery giving shape to my thoughts and images. With assertive finesse Wilson would say to you, 'Reading is an adventure without a known route or destination.' To me it allows for the pleasure of breaking away from the bonds of routine, to explore the bond we long for. To read is to live life many times over; and the friendship remains ever loyal. Ah...the mind is provoked in the privacy of listening to that quiet voice."

"Well, what do you think, can we work together?"

"Surely we can work together. If it is a search for each other's mind we will end up with a reactive discourse! For me, it is a trigger for how I wish to respond to the words, the thoughts. Ontor becomes the objective self, detached, one that does not belong. I do not respond to you, my writings are a response to those words. That is how my mind works. That is how I write. Perhaps we will discover more of each other, if we continue. If you do not agree, pray do tell why?"

"I know you as Ontor. But what do I call myself? Would you choose a pen name for me? Please do. You are a gift to me from the heavens. Why not the 'gift' now come up with a gift?"

"Why get into the emotional bindings of a name? Let us keep away from it, shall we? Perhaps you will again reiterate we are soul-mates on many levels! Maybe. Maybe not. Remain un-Named to me. My suggestion, take you and me --- he and she --- out of the equation while traversing the road of thoughts. Can we not be just persons? I wonder."

"Hold not your emotions but let it be free"

*For I will not be in judgment of you
I feel the fragrance of your life
Let me be the smile ever present on your lips
Let me be the sparkle of your being
Feel my presence in your soul.
And the heart always throbs. As I wait for your response I
imagine hearing your laughter as the evening stars gleam in
your hair!"*

Pausing briefly on the exclamation, Ontor reciprocates with a spirited touch of gray.

"But I can give death no name
Perhaps it is but a luminous silence
I can speak of no dreams
I walk on into the weary night
A story perhaps unfolds, restless in content..."

And then she adds, "Always remember I am a solitary traveller!"

"My day is made, for you have let me enter your Ontor. It is warm there. I say, 'Do not leave yet / Let me rearrange the world for you.'

It is a beautifully cloudy day, with that slight hint of sultry breeze. You create worlds upon worlds in my soul. Ah, it is indeed the soul, my friend. There is the heart stumbling upon another heart through the interplay of stars. That is when life reenergizes itself. Shall we start a new chapter in the long history of literary seductions?"

The conversation ends. Ontor tunes in to her thoughts, "Little do you realize tucked away in that autumn landscape of my mind is a small space of serene comfort selfishly mine, where I often go to meet the words. There I let my bluebird take to the sky, unfettered. As I become writer and reader the stranglehold of empty space fills with fistfuls of sunshine. I find the pleasure of connecting thus as partnership with living. It is my Ai (love)! True, it takes two to tango, the writer and reader, but surely the intensity of seductive pleasure can only be of the writer! Admittedly, seduction is a reaction, in need of an actor. What if the writer's self becomes that actor? How else do great writings happen? One sees through the objective other the deliberations of self and it validates one's expressions, thoughts, pleasures. That is how stories come alive. There is this intense joy of savouring such creations which obliterates the need for any beings' presence or feel. In the absence of this madness, of and about self, one cannot seduce the reader to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the substance of mind, the amazing entity that determines the prescriptions of life through accepting or rejecting the emotions, the imaginations, thus giving in to persuasion, allowance, temptations, and, yes, reason. Well, it is the writer who draws in that someone, but it is only possible when the writer too has been seduced to submission. Writing generates the