

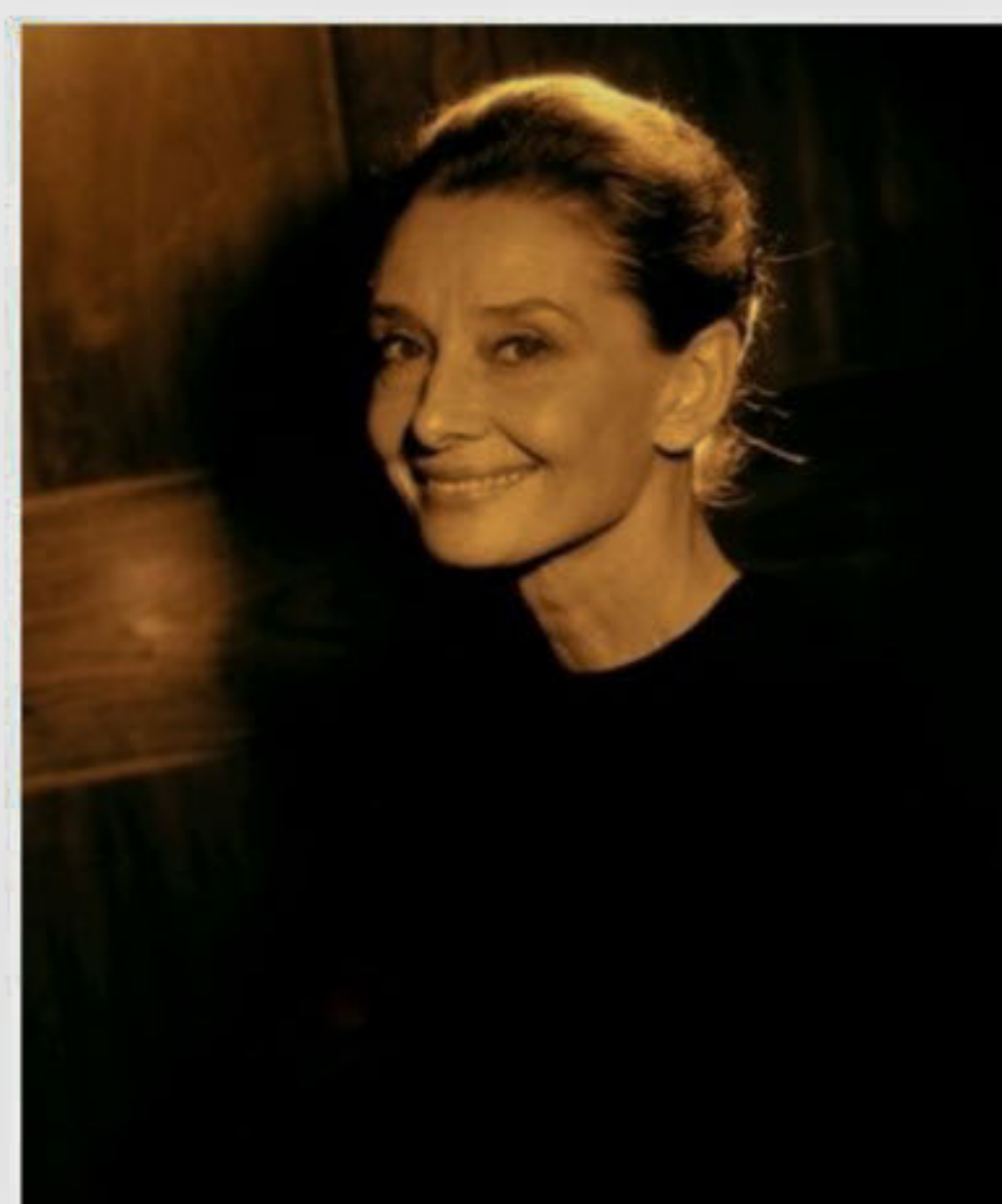
REMINISCENCES

Women who light candles

SYEDA ZAKIA AHSAN

My mother was the second of seven children, born in an aristocratic family in Murshidabad. She was married at the age of fourteen and gave birth to her eldest daughter Sakina, my oldest sibling, a great woman of piety and patience. Having very limited literacy and numeracy, my mother came to live with my father in Kolkata, a city very daunting with its levels of intellectual and cultural diversity. My father's ambition of speaking for the minority in India took away many years from his married life and he had to spend those years in jail. My mother was left on her own to cope with the myriad responsibilities of home and the arduous task of bringing up her ten children. She had the additional task of looking after some other children being brought up alongside my siblings. My mother displayed the most amazing calm and dignity during these troubled times. She was brave enough to face people from the intelligence department who came to search our home when my father was in Presidency Jail. She was the lighthouse in our choppy seas and inculcated in us many a quality of head and heart. As we grey with the weight of advancing years we remember her with the deepest reverence.

I went to Loreto School and College, to be taught and guided by Irish nuns who belonged to the Loreto Order. I have deep respect for them as they gave me the discipline and values that have made me the individual that I am today. They never asked us to convert to Christianity. On the contrary, they reminded us that we must always uphold our culture and our heritage, the same thing that I tell parents here in Britain when I run parenting courses. I once visited, naively as it were, the Missionaries of Charity at Lower Circular Road, Kolkata, with the intention of joining the Order. Mother Teresa was not there but the nun on duty gave me a piece of advice I will never forget. She told me that if I could go back home and look after my ailing mother that would be the best thing to do at that point in time. My respect for that order increased manifold after this incident. Although I could never become a nun I have tried to practise many



things that I have found praiseworthy in such renunciation. As I look at Mother Teresa's image in London home, I think of all the millions of human beings this lady was able to help in her lifetime. Such women are born perhaps once in a century.

Rabia Basri, who toiled all her life and spent her nights in prayer, is someone I wish I had met and could emulate. Her life is a reminder of selflessness and complete submission to Allah, a life spent in prayer not for any reward but for love of the Creator.

In my lifetime I have had the opportunity to meet women of substance and fame. I have found women of extreme fame to be very humble, loving and affectionate. Benazir Bhutto, whom I met in London in the late 1990s, was a very graceful woman who treated me with as much attention and love as would have my older sisters. She once gave me a box of chocolates and a copy of her biography. She was a wonderful host at her London flat and took me out for ice cream later. We talked on the phone and exchanged emails for several years. Not for once did she show any arrogance or pull rank.

I happened to interview Audrey Hepburn for

Radio Bangladesh in the 1980s. Her grace, elegance and poise charmed me. She gave me a rose that earlier one of the men from the radio had given her. Her gesture and fragrance can only be matched with flowers of mystic fragrance. Do artists nowadays have the same elegance or sobriety?

In London I have been a member of an NGO for the wives of expatriates. In that capacity I met Dr Gill McKilligin, who ended up being my mentor. The wife of an ex-governor of Belize, Gill mothered me until I settled here in the United Kingdom.

A few years ago, I decided to establish a charity and with that end in view sought the help and advice of Margaret Brayton MBE, who literally tutored me how on to set it up. Margaret is president of the Nurses Association and has had the privilege of having lunch with George V. She treated me like a child and took me sightseeing to different places in London. She also took me to a special service at Westminster Abbey which the Queen attended. Margaret and I had the privilege of sitting in close proximity to the queen.

Margaret worked in the Second World War, a time when she gave up having sugar because of its scarcity. She has held high office in numerous NGOs and developmental organisations and has dedicated her life to the welfare of women in the Commonwealth. Margaret is someone whose advice and guidance I will cherish forever. The charity Foundation of Hope is running and is in its seventh year.

The women I have mentioned above have enlightened me with their life experience.

Additionally, I pay tribute to the women who have the courage to bear the death of their sons in Palestine and all the women in Somalia who are brave enough to bear the brunt of the famine and to all women across the globe now struggling to give their children the right values to build their lives on. Every righteous woman lights a candle for a world that will bring peace, that will have no wars and that will have no child going to bed hungry.

Syeda Zakia Ahsan runs the charity Foundation of Hope in London

FARIHA TAHSIN

The cold winter night hears the screams of a woman trying to bear the pain of childbirth. She writhes on a hospital bed in West London, her perspiration soaking the white sheet on the bed. Slowly the pain numbs her and the dreary blue walls of the hospital go out of focus.

After nineteen hours of agonizing pain, the frail body of a middle aged Sylheti woman gives birth to its third child in a faraway land, a land whose customs, language and mannerisms are alien to her even after the nine years she has spent in it. Looking at her baby daughter, she wonders how different her offspring's life is going to be from the one she herself has led. And that thought did not sadden her at all. As the daughter of a conservative, 'khandani' Sylheti family she herself had led a mundane, uninteresting life.

It is believed by many that one's personality, one's ambition, determine the quality of life one will lead. But Rukhsana Begum (for that is the name her outdated, backward parents had given her) felt differently. She believed personality was determined by the quality of life one was provided with. That theory she used as an excuse for her own persona, which a lot of westerners would describe as unadventurous. Some might even go so far as to describe her as utterly dull.

Rukhsana looked down at the tiny creature lying in her arms and decided that her life had to be different. She made a mental note to ascertain that her daughter would never be referred to as a foreigner in this land.

She began with the name. She wanted a name that would sound very English. She thought of the limited number of foreign names she knew. As

it was, she mostly stayed home, and had never socialized with anyone who wasn't Sylheti or at least Bengali. Her husband would simply not approve. He said it wasn't appropriate for 'decent, Muslim women' to mingle with kafirs. She did not really mind it much, even if she was allowed to. It wasn't as if she could have communicated with them. The little English that she knew might have impressed the women back home. However, here, in reality, it was barely enough to get the grocery shopping done (at a store on the next block that was owned and run by a second generation Sylheti).

She thought of names that she had heard of in her kindergarten years --- Jill, Mary, Twinkle, Rebecca. After a lot of thinking she decided Jessica sounded the 'smartest' and the most 'English'.

But her husband wouldn't hear of it. He wanted his daughter to be well grounded; he did not want her to lose her roots. Besides, he said, Jessica was a kafir's name. 'Proper Muslim girls' always had names derived from the Quran. Rukhsana gave in. It wasn't appropriate for 'proper Muslim girls' to argue with their husbands. Her mother had always said, "Zamair fayor tole oilo bou or behest" (translated it meant: A woman's heaven lies at her husband's feet)

They (read 'he') ended up naming the baby Nazma Begum, after his late mother. He said it was a fitting name for a modern Muslim woman who was to grow up in London.

Fariha Tahsin currently studies economics at the University of Essex.

POETRY

Fire Sermon

(Dedicated to Rumana Manzur)

NAFISA JAMAL

Fire burns, destroys, devastates
and also purifies.
To certain special individuals
it loses its fiery glow
and turns to beautiful,
flowery bower.
At Parsi temples it burns
continuously
as it does in Shikha
Anirban.
Sita walked fearlessly on
sacred, red-hot coals
proving her chastity.
Marriage vows are
exchanged
around its shiny glow.
Glass blowers' blazing
furnace
shapes images of their
unique craft.
Thought of hell-fire
burning non-stop
steers people to moral
paths.
Fire appeared and with it
dawned civilization.
Prometheus was
punished
as mankind lived in
divine comfort.

They say "Marriages are made in Heaven."
One wonders: would they be better if made in Hell!

Nafisa Jamal is Professor, Department of English, Dhaka University.

CRITICISM

Slavery in American literature

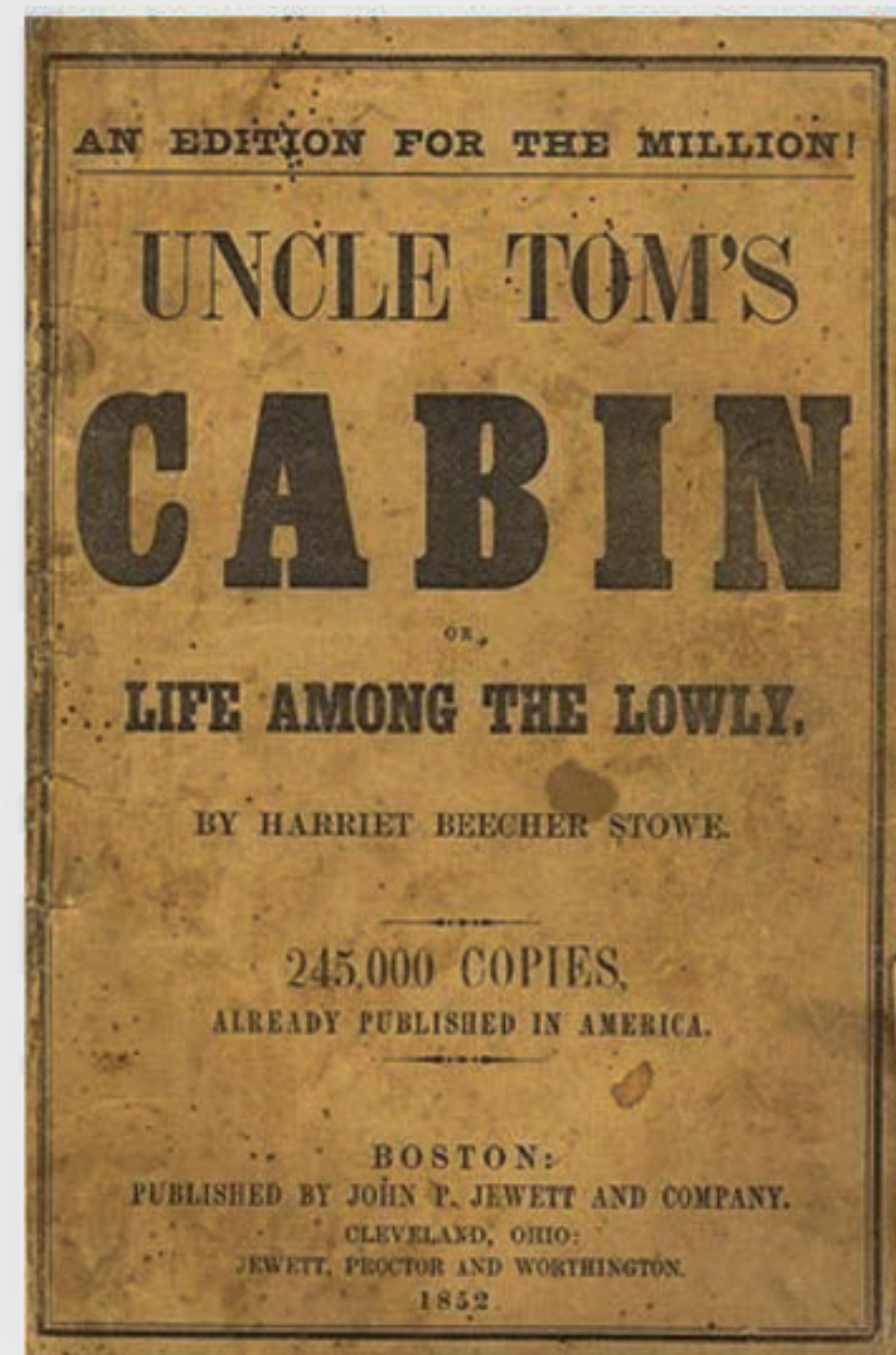
ABID ANWAR

Those who believe all writers are humanists will either have to change their notion or redefine humanism in a new angle if exposed to the American literary debate in the mid-nineteenth century on the issue of slavery. American writers were divided, to side with politicians they liked or with the socioeconomic interests of the communities they belonged to. Even in creative literature, including songs of that time on the issue of slavery, a gross ethnocentrism or community interest was reflected.

My visit to the parental residence of George Washington in May 1985 in Mount Vernon a few hours' drive from Washington, DC inspired me to have an in-depth reading of old literature on the issue of slavery. Along with the kingly beddings, furniture, utensils, and other belongings in the residence, the dwelling-sheds of slaves are shown to visitors on a regular schedule since the place by now became a museum. The cemented bed of each slave was a space, elevated a bit from the original floor inside a small room with no windows. A tiny ventilator in each room was the only means of aeration that gave oxygen supply to the slave while resting or sleeping in his shed. Iron-made chains, with their roots clung to the walls used for clapping the leg(s) and hand(s) of a slave, may help a visitor reminisce on the inhuman living conditions of those human beings! Yet, most politicians and writers in the South spoke and wrote against abolition of slavery, while those in the North commonly supported abolition.

The process of colonization by migrant Europeans started first in the northern part of the American territory. As in all other places of human habitation, these northerners had initially an agro-based economy and were the first to invest in industries with the surplus sale-proceeds from agricultural products exported to European markets. The southerners, on the other hand, were still dependent on agriculture, this being more profitable for round-the-year crop-production advantage in a sub-tropical climate. Snowfall for a longer duration in the North hindered agricultural productivity, leading to rapid industrialization. The industrialists needed hirelings (daily-wagers) or employees on monthly payment as free citizens, and not as slaves whereas the landlords of the South found the slaves as their most essential and cost-effective workforce.

The issue of slavery instigated fury in the Civil War between southerners and northerners. Since it is widely known that President Abraham Lincoln put an end to the slavery as a social institution, one may tend to believe that he himself was an abolitionist. In reality, Lincoln's role was one of a clever politician who sided with none as evidenced from his response to an editorial titled, 'The Prayer of 20,000,000 People', by Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*. After the publication of the editorial on 19 August 1862, Lincoln, in his Open



Letter to Horace Greeley, clarified his neutral policy on the issue of slavery, thus:

"My paramount object in the struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

This implies that Lincoln's prime concern was to stop the war, for uniting people, putting an end to the North-South conflict, but neither to abolish nor to conserve slavery. His intention as president of the country was to please both sides. All politicians other than Lincoln; writers and singers were divided on the issue of slavery, mostly guided by their community interest as stated earlier.

Walt Whitman, often said to be a 'war-born poet', was vocal against slavery from his boyhood. His protest against slavery was reflected both in his poetry and in his journalistic writings. Political and intellectual divisions sprouted in America in 1850 immediately after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed by the United States Congress. The Act upheld the legal right of slave owners to capture and bring back their fugitive slaves with the help of the law-enforcing agencies of the government. Whitman courageously opined in writing that he would rather help a slave to flee to safety were any such occasion to arise.

The poet and scholar Ralph Waldo Emerson declared in public that he would disobey the Act, and the writer Henry David Thoreau really assisted a slave in his attempt to flee to Canada. In 1854, while police were trying to arrest a fugitive slave named Anthony Burns in Boston, an angry mob on the street thwarted their action. The beleaguered policemen had to call in the army for their rescue. However, Burns

was ultimately caught and handed over to his master.

Immediately after the above incident, an anti-slavery social activist, John Brown, was hanged by the authorities for the charge of instigating a slave mutiny in Virginia. Appeals by Emerson and Thoreau to the government to withdraw the verdict against Brown ended in failure. After his execution, a feminist poet and lyricist Julia Ward Howe wrote a song titled 'John Brown's Body':

*Old John Brown's body is a-mouldering in the dust,
Old John Brown's rifle's red with blood-spots turned to rust,
Old John Brown's pike has made its last, unflinching thrust,
His soul is marching on!*

Soldiers in the North used to sing this song, among a few others, while marching or resting in camps during the civil war. The second piece, on the scale of popularity, was another by James Sloan Gibbons.

John Greenleaf Whittier's extroverted poetry on the issue and Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had probably the greatest impact on refreshing public opinion towards abolition of slavery in the USA. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had an even greater impact when George L Aiken produced a drama based on the story. After the Civil War ended, Mrs. Stowe had a chance to hand over a copy of her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to President Abraham Lincoln. After she had introduced herself to the president, Lincoln said: 'Oh I see! You are that little woman who instigated an outrageous civil war in the country!'

It is imprudent to say that these abolitionists were all guided by sheer ethnocentrism or community interest of the northerners; some might have really seen slavery as an inhuman social institution with a humanistic mindset, although most of them incidentally belonged to the North. However, the southerners who opposed abolition of slavery overtly expressed their community interest in their speeches and writings. They argued that if slavery were abolished, the freed slaves would migrate to the North seeking easier jobs in offices and industries, leaving the hard laborious jobs involved in agriculture in the southern states. This would jeopardize the southern agro-based economy. As additional positive points in favour of slavery, they opined that the industrial economy of the North too would be affected because of the failure to supply raw material (cotton) from the South for the textile industries of the North.

Although John C. Calhoun and Daniel Webster were writers, they were more famous as politicians. They strongly supported conservation of slavery in the interest of the southern economy. Webster's speeches had a greater impact than his writings. It was commonly believed that Webster was one among the few orators America has ever produced. John Pendleton Kennedy, in his famous novel

Swallow Burn published in 1832, portrayed the intimate relationship between the white masters and the black slaves. The novelist illustrated how the masters bestowed their love and affection upon their slaves. The following quote from William Gilmore Simms, a poet, novelist, and historian, sounds like a new definition of humanism:

"Slavery is a widely-devised institution of Heaven, devised for benefit, improvement and safety, morally, socially, and physically, of a barbarous and inferior race, who would otherwise perish by filth, by the sword, by disease, by waste and destinies forever gnawing and finally destroying."

This notion which I would like to term 'pseudo-humanism of the conservationists' was more clearly depicted in a 1600-line poem titled 'The Hiring and the Slave' by poet William J Grayson. The poem presented a comparison of the life of a daily-wager with that of a slave and pin-pointed the uncertainty of earning by the former for his livelihood whereas the slave was said to be in a better position in terms of food security, shelter, healthcare, and recreational activities in a family atmosphere. While reading the poem, one may be inclined to feel that slavery was really "a widely-devised institution of Heaven" for an inferior race, in the words of William Gilmore Simms.

Another talented poet, Henry Timrod, also wrote a series of poems defending conservation of slavery as a social institution. He preached the same pseudo-humanism, although his voice had a lesser impact on the masses because of the brilliance of his rhetorical expressions. His poems were enriched with a classic architectural build-up that served as barriers to reaching general readers.

The issue of slavery continued to incite the feelings of creative writers long after the Civil War ended and, to many, the best literary pieces were published after the political upheaval had calmed down and the social crises resolved. Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, published in 1825, and Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* are acclaimed to be the best instances of creativity based on the issue of slavery and the American Civil War [It is to be noted that Julia Ward Howe earlier wrote her lyric with the same title].

It can apparently be observed that both abolitionist and conservationist writers were devoted to safeguarding the interests of their respective communities guided by sheer ethnocentrism as did the politicians, the social activists and people at large. This disproves the hypothesis derived from a common belief that all writers have a humanistic mindset. Similar examples in our society are also not rare.

Abid Anwar is a poet, essayist, literary critic and lyricist.