

# Poetry steeped in symbolism

## Tusar Talukder speaks of the pure soul

Let me begin by trying to understand how Obayed Akash has composed his recent book of poetry. Were all the poems created consciously or subconsciously or through the blending of the two?

Wordsworth considered poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, largely proving that poetry comes from a subconscious state of mind. But with the evolution of time modernists and post-modernists have suggested that the composition of poetry is more associated with the conscious than the subconscious. In other words, while developing the themes and diction of a poem, a poet remains in a very conscious state of mind because the sub-conscious may bar him/her from expressing the anticipated tone of a poem. But I think the most acceptable contemporary theory is that a poem blends both conscious and sub-conscious thoughts. Obayed Akash, a major poet of 1990s' Bangladesh, has emerged with a collection of poetry, *Jaa Kichhu Sabuj, Sangketmoy*, comprising 57 poems, published in 2010. It is his tenth book of verse. In this volume 42 poems are in free verse while prose-poems are 15 in all. Notably, Obayed Akash was awarded *HSBC Kali O Kolom Tarun Kobi Puroshkar 2008* for his previous volume of poetry *Shiter Prokar* (Types of Winter).

It is very easy to consider Akash as a pure post-modern poet because his latest collection delineates multifarious post-modern genres, namely, surrealism, symbolism, magic realism and realism. Some may say that Akash has made his poems intensely symbolic. So how would we regard him as a post-modern poet? The question has a very simple answer: the use of magic realism and blending of different genres in the poetry and above all his facile diction define him as a post-modern poet.

Some of Akash's poems need observation. A substantial poem entitled *Upokule Pronoy Kahini* informs us of two lovers by the sea, with milk-like white waves coming towards them furiously to taste their love. De facto, the prime task of poetry is to create a new world in the mind and Akash's poems have that strength to wander into the realm of the human mind. However, his compositions become outstanding owing to his spontaneity. The words in the poetry become life-like through his competent use. Readers can instantly draw a picture in their minds through a reading of a poem.

In some cases the words Akash employs in



Jaa Kichhu Sabuj Shangketmoy  
Obayed Akash  
Iltadi Publications

his poetry are unconventional and even regional. Surprisingly enough, he assembles very appropriate words in his poetry without any awkwardness. Critics may argue that Akash has used these appropriate words from a conscious state of mind because it is tough to place the right words in the right places without conscious thinking. My feeling is that in some cases the words come to the poet spontaneously when he deeply thinks of any poem. Akash has composed poetry for the very well-educated and thoughtful. To capture the essence of his poetry and philosophy, the poems should be read altogether. Readers may peruse a collection of essays by the poet, entitled *Ghasher Restura* (Restaurant of Grass) before they read this recent composition of poetry.

Despite being a post-modern poet, Akash extensively uses symbolism. He basically creates a web of symbolism with some remarkable dimensions. He engages readers to stop and think with the symbols he uses. He feels much more comfortable writing in verse forms rather than in lyrical poetry. It seems his poetry is made of blood and bread. But what does 'blood and bread' indicate? Akash comes up with an immediate answer: poetry produces image and music and blood and bread become an inseparable part of the images. He invariably attempts to bring out things concealed to the surface. Akash realizes through his wander-

ings in the realm of poetry that poetry itself has a power and beauty to transform life and society.

*Rajar Mrityu* (King's Death), *Kotha Bole Mrito Dim* (Dead Eggs Speak), *Tarokader Somsar* (Star Family) are packed with magic reality. He has picked up his men and women from various classes in our society and decorated his canvas with their activities. The portraits are very lively but sometimes ironically the sprightly dance of the characters alarms us about forthcoming catastrophes and their negative impact on our society. *Rajar Mrityu* incorporates history, evolution and human expectations. His poems tell us he attempts to surpass time to project upcoming realism. In the poem *Patal Train* (Underground Train) he explicates the evolution of trains and compares it with our social realities.

He humorously informs us that a train compartment may be one type of alternative habitat to live in. The pictograph he develops through this poem is outstanding. For readers to identify some magic realistic happenings I have translated some lines from *Patal Train*:

"We have observed through an underground train how a train can be beautified like a house with furniture. And children, aged people, young men and women, bridegroom and bride, father, mother all together eat nuts and fried chick peas there on the train. But all at once the train turns upside down in an accident and we notice how people turning into birds and furniture turning into fishes create a new world to live in. I ask those who support this new world to please come forward and lift their hands to grab the unbelievable prizes. I made this arrangement only for you. The remaining passengers on the train say the process of changing the world is initiated by turning a train compartment upside down."

Another poem titled *Shomporko* (Relations) exemplifies a higher state of love. In one phase of this poem Akash says:

*Centering on the love between you and me / people say so many things along the way / the walking fishes crawl in the yard on rainy days*

Archibald Macleish once said that 'a poem should not mean but be.' Akash's poems should not be read to net their inner themes but as an unbounded source of pleasure. For it appears to me that Akash has begun a journey to discover the purity of the soul through his poetic revelations.

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# Everyone has a story

## Nausheen Rahman reads tales well told

What starts out as a thrilling depiction of a dangerous situation soon takes on the form of an engrossing set of stories recounted by the different characters in Chitra Divakaruni's *One Amazing Thing*.

A severe earthquake strikes an American city; nine people (including two consulate employees) are trapped inside an Indian Consulate Visa Office. As things go from bad to worse, an affinity gradually develops amongst these nine individuals. These are people of different nationalities, ages and temperaments, all brought together by a common fate. Most of them had been waiting for their turn to be called for the interview (with different thoughts in their minds) when disaster had struck.

These people have no idea if they'll get out alive; hopes of being able to survive come and go. Fear and desperation evoke different reactions. They start running low on food, water, patience, courage.

One member of the group is Uma, an Indian girl who has grown up in America and who has always been interested in the secrets of strangers. It is her idea that the hapless people stranded there start telling their stories. She says: "Everyone has a story. I don't believe anyone can go through life without encountering at least one amazing thing". It is this 'one amazing thing' in each character's life that this book offers in the enjoyable stories woven around it.

Each story highlights the one amazing thing in the teller's life. The stories are about very different things, things that have had deep, far-reaching effects. Uma explains to everyone that in these very difficult and frightening circumstances, they can keep their stress away by telling an important story from their lives. Some warm up to the suggestion, others need goading.

In the face of impending death, trying hard to keep their morale up, they start talking ..... about feelings hitherto unuttered, sometimes even unacknowledged. The ancient art of storytelling casts its spell over the group. The person telling the story experiences a

sort of catharsis, and the listeners get inextricably caught up in the narration. The relating of very personal, very poignant happenings to complete strangers seems to thaw reserves and to actually lighten some of the tension. Past incidents surface and pent up emotions are released as people recall memories, important and trivial.

In addition to the mesmerizing stories is the graphic description of the scene inside the visa office where conditions are deteriorating: "It was as though a giant had placed his mouth against the building's foundation and roared"; "the giant took the building in both his hands and shook it". In the midst of the touching efforts for survival,

people find a strange peace and relief through unexpected camaraderie they have unwittingly built up.

The group consists of an interesting medley of characters. There's Jiang, a Chinese woman, and her talented granddaughter, Lily. Jiang tells her heartbreaking story. Mr. Pritchett's story goes straight to the heart, especially of those who value attachments with their pets. A young Muslim boy, Tariq's rancour at America's treatment of Muslims is expressed intensely through his story; it is bound to leave a lasting impression.

Mangalam's account drives home the fact that circumstances can affect or change a person's nature. Mrs. Pritchett

describes her fascinating spiritual encounter. Cameron, a Black American ex-soldier, feels a compulsion to atone for the wrong he feels he has done. Uma's story leaves us awe-struck as we read her description of her surreal experience, an experience that had made her get her life back on track.

Divakaruni leaves the conclusion unresolved. Even though it seems that, with the end of Uma's story, will come the end to all their lives, readers cannot be sure. That only adds to the beauty of the book. I recommend this book strongly to all those who get bewitched by tales well told tales.

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One Amazing Thing  
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni  
Penguin Books

# A portrait of the Third World

## Nabila Obayed spots the real in fiction

Like the third world estate, the Third World is nothing, and wants to be something.

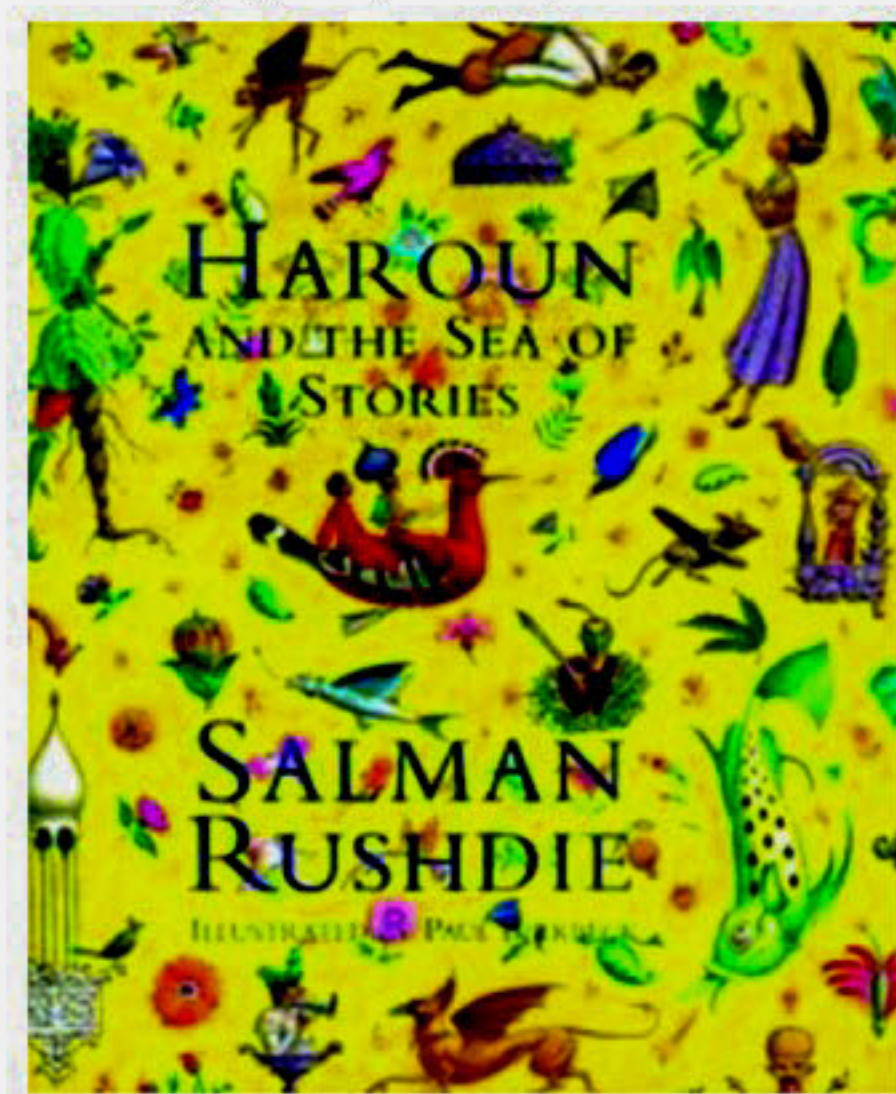
Alfred Sauvy A phantasmagorical novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* by Salman Rushdie beautifully encrypts the scenario of Third World countries. With a cartoonish attitude the novel discovers different facts' trail behind Third World countries. Putting India as an example of it the author refers to major deficient traits like political bias, population and pollution problems in the novel. Using the method of magic realism, the novel successfully portrays the real situation in a Third World country like India, placing the real and the 'Fantastick' in the same stream of thought. Besides India, the novel can also be an example of deficiencies concerning the social and political system of Bangladesh. As part of the Third World, Bangladesh also faces issues that have a resemblance to what Rushdie puts across in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

"In those days it was almost election time, and the grand panjandrums of various political parties all came to Rashid, smiling their fat-cat smiles, to beg him to tell his stories at their rallies and nobody else's" (Rushdie, 20). The political bias of different political parties is clearly explained by the author in this novel. In Third World countries political parties' pessimistic attitude is noted by all citizens. For example, the two opposing parties of Bangladesh always remain busy in antagonizing each other. News in recent times provides proof of it.

"The Anti-Corruption Commission yesterday sued former prime minister Khaleda Zia and three others for abusing power to set up a charitable trust named after late president Ziaur Rahman." "BNP termed the case "baseless and politically motivated" and said it is part of the government's conspiracy to eliminate the opposition." (Khaleda sued, 2011). This is a very common picture of Bangladesh as well as other Third World countries. These parties sometimes make someone the hat on the head and sometimes the footwear. Similarly, in the novel, when Rashid Khalifa speaks nothing but 'Ark, Ark, Ark' in front of 'a thick forest of human beings', "two men with mustachios and loud yellow check pants shouted at Rashid and accused him of having taken a bribe from their rivals, and suggested that they might cut off his tongue and other items also." (Rushdie, 26-27). This is how political bias has remained one of the major drawbacks in Third World.

"In the sad city, people mostly had big families; but the poor children got sick and

starved, where the rich kids overate and quarreled over their parents' money." (Rushdie, 18). This statement provides a view of a big population which is mainly divided into two classes, poor and rich. The author astutely brings out each and every class division existing in society and created by so-called Democracy behind the face of Capitalism: *The Khalifas lived in the downstairs part of a small concrete house... It wasn't a grand house, nothing like the skyscrapers where the super-rich folks lived; then again, it was nothing like the dwellings of the poor, either. The poor lived in tumbledown shacks made of old cardboard boxes and plastic sheeting, and these shacks were glued together by despair. And then there were the super-poor, who had no homes at all. They slept on pavements and in the doorways of shops, and had to pay rent to local gangsters for doing even that.*



Haroun and the Sea of Stories  
Salman Rushdie  
Penguin Books

(Rushdie, 18)

The above excerpt provides a hint of four remaining classes of society, Upper Class, Middle Class, Lower Class and Super-Lower Class who have no home at all. This is a very common picture in a Third World country. For example, the "super-poor" class holding street children is one of the prominent groups in Bangladesh. Wahida Banu, executive director of Aparajeyo-Bangladesh, tells The Daily Star in an interview, "There are about 6.5 lakh street children in Bangladesh, according to

estimates carried out in 2005" . . . "more and more children are living on the streets and vulnerable due to poverty, natural disasters, a split in the family, and greedy relatives who bring them to the city and to sell them off." (Rahman, 2011). In the same article, reference is made to a street child Shafiqul Islam Khan, who says, "When I boarded the train, I did not know my destination. I was taken directly to Dhaka at the Kamalapur Railway Station, where I stayed for about three years. I . . . used to wash utensils around the station to make a living" (Rahman, 2011). So these sources describe the situation of the poor and super-poor class in Bangladesh, placing the country firmly in the Third World. However the growing population issue often rings the bell on educated people in such these countries since "This child business is not such an easy thing." (Rushdie, 19).

"The air was cool and clean, because the rain washed away most of the black smoke billowing out of the sadness factories." (Rushdie, 21). Pollution is another major problem for Bangladesh. The novel on its very first page brings up the story of pollution where "Black smoke poured out of the chimneys of the sadness factories and hung over the city like bad news." (Rushdie, 15). Industrial wastes act as a major reason behind pollution. "A World Bank study said four major rivers near Dhaka -- the Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Turag and Balu -- receive 1.5 million cubic metres of waste water every day from 7,000 industrial units in surrounding areas and another 0.5 million cubic meters from other sources." (Majumder, 2009). Ainnun Nishat, a leading environmental expert, notes, "Much of the Buriganga is now gone, having fallen to ever insatiable land grabbers and industries dumping untreated effluents into the river" (Majumder, 2009). The threatening effects of pollution are thus making people's life difficult day by day.

The novel brings forth Third World issues in the guise of a simple children's story which also provides an ironic look into social drawbacks like political bias, population and pollution problems. It is important to remember that "a number of Third World countries were former colonies, and with the end of imperialism, many of these countries, especially the smaller ones, were faced with the challenges of nation- and institution-building on their own for the first time" (Third World, 2011).

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# An African thinker

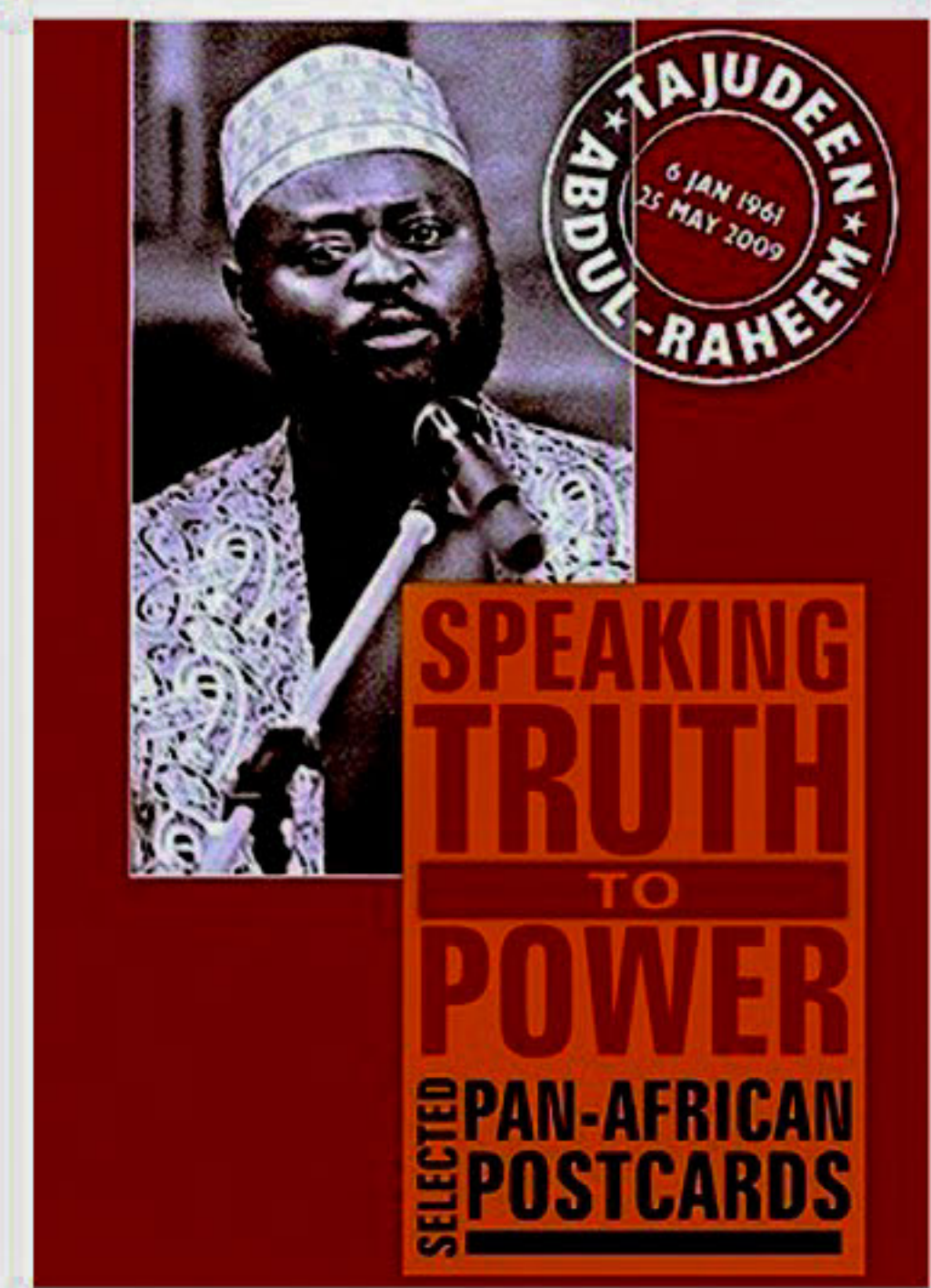
## Syed Badrul Ahsan recalls an idealist

There is much about Africa that we do not know. Yes, there are the civil wars and the pogroms that we are pelted with day after day through the media. The tales of corrupt, venal dictators and of the murderous nature of men, as in the Rwanda genocide of 1994 or the post-independence happenings in the Congo in the early 1960s, are what have kept us bound to the thought that Africa is a synonym for chaos. That is a mistaken belief, for Africa is a place, a continent like any other. Nature has endowed it with beauty. Its people, part of its innumerable tribes, have kept life going in the way their ancestors did long ago.

Africa has had and has its cultural ferment at work. You go back to the era of Leopold Sedar Senghor, the poet president of Senegal, to appreciate the intellectual affluence of the continent. Men like Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba are synonymous with the political renaissance that freed much of Africa of colonial domination through the 1950s and 1960s. In the early 1990s, it was Nelson Mandela's release from long incarceration that set Africa off into a new journey to political revival.

African writers have created waves around the world. Chinua Achebe is one. Wole Soyinka is another. Ken Saro-Wiwa, the brilliant intellectual and human rights activist hanged by the murderous Sani Abacha regime in Nigeria in 1995, is another name you roll off your tongue. The young Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has given us *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a sad novel on the collapse of Biafra and the resultant misery of the Igbo of eastern Nigeria.

So there is the richness of Africa for you. The richness acquires deeper tones when you stumble upon the late Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem's collection of incisive essays, aptly titled *Speaking Truth to Power*. Tajudeen, again a Nigerian, died young, in 2009. Born in 1961, he was killed in a road accident in Nairobi on Africa Liberation Day, which of course is 25 May. But in the brief span of life that he lived, he demonstrated a skill for conducting informed discourse on the many issues that plague Africa in a way few have done earlier. He was acquainted with leading political and social figures of the continent. As a leading voice in the Pan-Africanist Movement, he crisscrossed the continent trying to bridge the divides that kept Africa unable to come together, indeed unable to put in place governments that could and would promote the aspirations of their peoples. Tajudeen obtained a first class honours degree in political science from Bayero University in Kano, before going



Speaking Truth to Power  
Selected Pan-African Postcards  
Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem  
Pambazuka Press

on to Oxford on a Rhodes fellowship to do a DPhil. After that it was a long association with the Pan-Africanist Movement that led him on to wider expanses of political involvement with Africa. His was a leading role in organising the seventh Pan-African Congress in Kampala in 1994, with delegates from forty-seven countries taking part. In the same year, Tajudeen was part of a team that visited Rwanda to assess conditions there. Ambushed on the trip, Tajudeen narrowly escaped death.

*Speaking Truth to Power* is a frontal assault on the hypocrisies that have afflicted the corridors of power in Africa. It is also an objective evaluation of the realities. Consider some of the themes Tajudeen addresses in the work: Winnie Mandela at 70; Killing of John Garang; who did it?; Presidency in perpetuity; Does Meles think he's Africa's George Bush?; Corrupt leaders are mass murderers; Obama's challenge to Africans; France should be in the dock, not Kagame; Taking Pan-Africanism to the people.

You emerge from a reading of the essays here wanting to learn more about a continent that has fascinated and intrigued us in equal measure.

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