

## FICTION

## A letter unread . . .

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

**Prologue:**  
He does not expect to get a letter from her as he did not ask her to write one. Then again, how would he? No one writes letters these days. Or perhaps no one has written letters in a long time. Letter writing has become old-fashioned, obsolete and almost extinct. But she cannot help writing one for her own sake and also because of the fact that that she has not yet grown any fascination for electronically produced mails to be sent through the speediest of a much valued technology of communication. To her, it seems as if everyone, for that matter the whole world, is always in a state of emergency and that is how sending and receiving messages of whatever form that be has become the mainstay of our life and work. She fears that one day, maybe sooner rather than later, the telephone might be dislodged as well, if not completely then to a considerable extent. This particular thought in her evoked queer feelings, prompting someone to comment that, under the circumstances, she would definitely be regarded as an 'illiterate', at least in America. It was a phrase she thoroughly enjoyed. Expressions like 'colon blind' and 'tone deaf' began reverberating in her ears along with 'computer illiterate', ascribed to her only recently. She even aspired to get her name down in the Guinness Book of Records under this category. The guy was outwitted momentarily. Contemplating once again, writing the letter, her imagination took her back to visual flashes of the mind where she recalled the words, 'Someone somewhere wants a letter from you', inscribed on the body of the bright red mail van --- On Her Majesty's Service --- that she would watch with much fascination in the early Sixties and still remembers with much fondness. She wonders how much one's feelings and emotions metamorphose with the passage of time. Perhaps very little, perhaps not at all, she thinks. Then she sits down and starts writing the letter, however antiquated the practice might be, with as much vividness as her heart can put into it, but succinctly. Since she calls him 'Priyo', she writes 'Dear Priyo' in salutation, only to realize immediately that she has committed a tautological error. She crosses out 'Dear'.

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Priyo,  
Having got used to my course of life and that too over a very long time, I became somewhat like an insensate rock, losing much of my feelings, be they of happiness, well being, pain or whatever. Dead to the world, I reached a stage where I developed an imperviousness to such sensations and have grown quite well adjusted to it the way one copes with one's circumstances and ultimately learns to be helpless. A kind of fatalism sets in. Ironically it suited me. After all, are not human beings endowed with that unique characteristic of adaptability that makes one life different from another?

Then you came from nowhere, most unexpected, least to be seen and believed, raising a riotous storm in the season of winter. There must have been a shower of rain as well at that time, which is not unlikely in winter. It increases the

temperature, the cold urging a need for warmth. And exactly this is what happened in me. Nazrul's romantic song, *pashaner bhange ghumi / ke tumi shonar chhonwaen*, aptly describes my feelings at the time. So does the theme in Tagore's celebrated poem *Nirjhorer Shopnobhongo* where, observing the beauty and radiance of the gradually rising sun, the poet finds his heart fill with a celestial joy that, penetrating his heart, dispels the melancholy which had kept it covered so long. And the joy goes on flowing like a waterfall, he explains.

Priyo,  
I couldn't but borrow from these great masters because I am not adept at expressing myself with words as you do. Oftentimes I wonder how these artistes of words weave all kinds of emotions into a tapestry of life where lies something for every state of human life to draw from.

Perhaps I have digressed from what I was supposed to tell you. You brought sparkling mountain water to a land of drought. The thirsty, parched stretch of land drank all of it, desiring more and more. You became my oasis in an impassable journey through deserts. But deserts do have their own kind of storms, much severe, much harsher than the nor'westerlies that we experience in our months of Boishakh and Joishtho. When we met, it felt pleasantly warm in winter. Came spring, wherein there is a very special occasion to celebrate on the first day of Boshonto every year (your birthday) that soon is to be followed by the advent of the season heralding our own new year that brings along all its fury and turbulence.

You could not bear the jolt of it and took out all that went in you on me. You became aggressive and oftentimes vengeful. As much concerned as I was, yet I did not lose heart and was ready to go through thick and thin. I never made the mistake of misunderstanding you. I couldn't, even if I tried. For me it was love, a pure love and sacred. And that is why when in your extreme anger you would denigrate me, I would still miss you and feel the pangs of separation. As society came between us, you became a changed person. Your emotional involvement tapered off. And mine?

My innocent belief, innocent love and supreme faith in my commitment to life centering around you remained as it had from the beginning. Whatever might occur, thoughts of you would remain uppermost in my mind. My naivete would be misconstrued as foolishness or carelessness. Amidst all such tumultuous episodes, I remained steadfast in my belief, which belief turned into and remained one-sided for a long time. Meanwhile you veered away from me and revived your old relationships to keep yourself going. That reminded me of a real life story where punishment was meted out to someone who did not know what his offence was. My Achilles' heel is my habit of speaking the truth that comes so naturally to me.

Priyo,  
Does it sound like I am flattering myself? I am only narrating the obvious. I am writing this letter to you to relieve myself of the agonizing state of mind I have borne so long. Winter, spring and summer passed. I waited for the onset

of the rains, wishing that the downpour would merge with the outpourings of my heart. Much remained pent up in you, I recollect. But it did not work that way. It turned out to be a most tantalising season when I vacillated between hope and no-hope. I suffered and endured much in the process, learned to believe that it was pre-ordained. Once again I tried to derive solace from nature.

Then came autumn. All of autumn is another gorgeous season that more often than not passes rather unnoticed, perhaps because of the profusion of colour and beauty in the floral landscape of nature in spring, about which all of us become so eloquent. I guess if spring brings a variegation arousing awe, autumn creates a marvellous combination of white and blue, giving life to an azure, crystal texture to the sky --- with its floating clouds of pulverized white, shiny cotton. To me, autumn stands on an equal footing with spring. It is my favourite season, if you will remember it.

Once again, I am afraid, I have digressed. But you will allow it in a letter that is personal and perhaps a bit too expressive than usual, won't you? Those pearly drops of dew could not bring back that 'you' in you. You would not call me or answer my increasingly fewer phone calls. It felt as if you had freed yourself of me. A great silence descended at your end, making me feel like an accused. A constant feeling of separation gnawed at the very depths of my heart. Your silence said it all. It exacerbated the condition.

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Time would not stand still. It appeared in a most unexpected way. Even as I was bereft of hope, it shook a magic wand for me, one my ears could not decipher at first. An auditory illusion went on ringing a bell.

Yes, that was you! An undercurrent of emotions was about to overflow my heart, brimming over in quiet passion. My patience had shaken the magic wand, creating a brilliantly bright yet mellow rainbow across my horizon. You may see it as the final scene in the play of my life and feel glad about it.

But, Priyo, I am afraid I cannot end my letter on a happy note.

Yours,

R'

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**Epilogue:**

*She frantically searches for a word approximating 'biroho' in English but does not quite get it to her satisfaction. It is an enduring feeling she experiences, whether he is far or near. She wonders if she will be able to cross this divide of separation in this world. At this point, Nazrul pensively reverberates within her: 'Hey priyo / tomar amar majhe biroho parapar / kemone hoibo paar'.*

*She loves this song because of two reasons. One, it tells her story. Two, she calls him Priyo. She believes, though, that this state of separation is only fleeting, that in life after death barriers will be no more.*

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## ESSAY

## Tagore poetry in English

RASHID ASKARI

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is considered to be the greatest Bengali writer ever born. Although a 'myriad-minded man', he was not much confident of his English language skills. He made a clear confession of this to Ezra Pound, William Rothenstein, Ramananda Chatterjee, and his daughter Bella and niece Indira. He thought his English was not good enough to suit him fine. But the success of the English versions of his Gitanjali poems and that of his speeches in the American lecture circuit even before he had risen to prominence by winning the Nobel Prize must have proved that his fears were groundless. Researchers have explored many qualities of permanence in his English writings.

Rabindranath was not a writer in English as such. He took to writing in English owing to pressure from his admirers at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the corpus of his writings in English is pretty large and manifold. It generally falls into two major categories—originals and translations. Although he began this part of his career in his early fifties as a translator of his own writings, he did a considerable amount of original writing and translation of others' works. In addition, he used the language to write scores of letters, and to give numerous lectures, talks, speeches, and addresses across the globe.

With the growing cultural awareness in this postcolonial era, the Bengali-speaking people, especially the younger generation, have developed a tremendous interest in Rabindranath Tagore, the quintessence of our literary and cultural identity. The 150th anniversary of his birth has been celebrated throughout the world with boundless enthusiasm. UNESCO has declared 2011 as the year of Tagore, along with some other literary luminaries. World attention is being hugely focused on this great Eastern literary icon.

The English version of Gitanjali (Song Offerings) was first published by India Society, London, in 1912, and was dedicated to William Rothenstein. It includes 103 poems, of which 53 are taken from the Bengali version of Gitanjali published in 1910. The rest are extracted from his other works: 16 from Gitimalya (1914), 16 from Naivedya (1901), 11 from Kheya (1906) 3 from Sisu (1903), one each from Kalpana (1900), Smaran (1903), Gitali (1896), and Utsarga (1914), and one song from the play Acalayatan (1912). All the 103 poems, however, are translated by the author himself, and can be considered as an anthology of his poems written over a period of ten years.

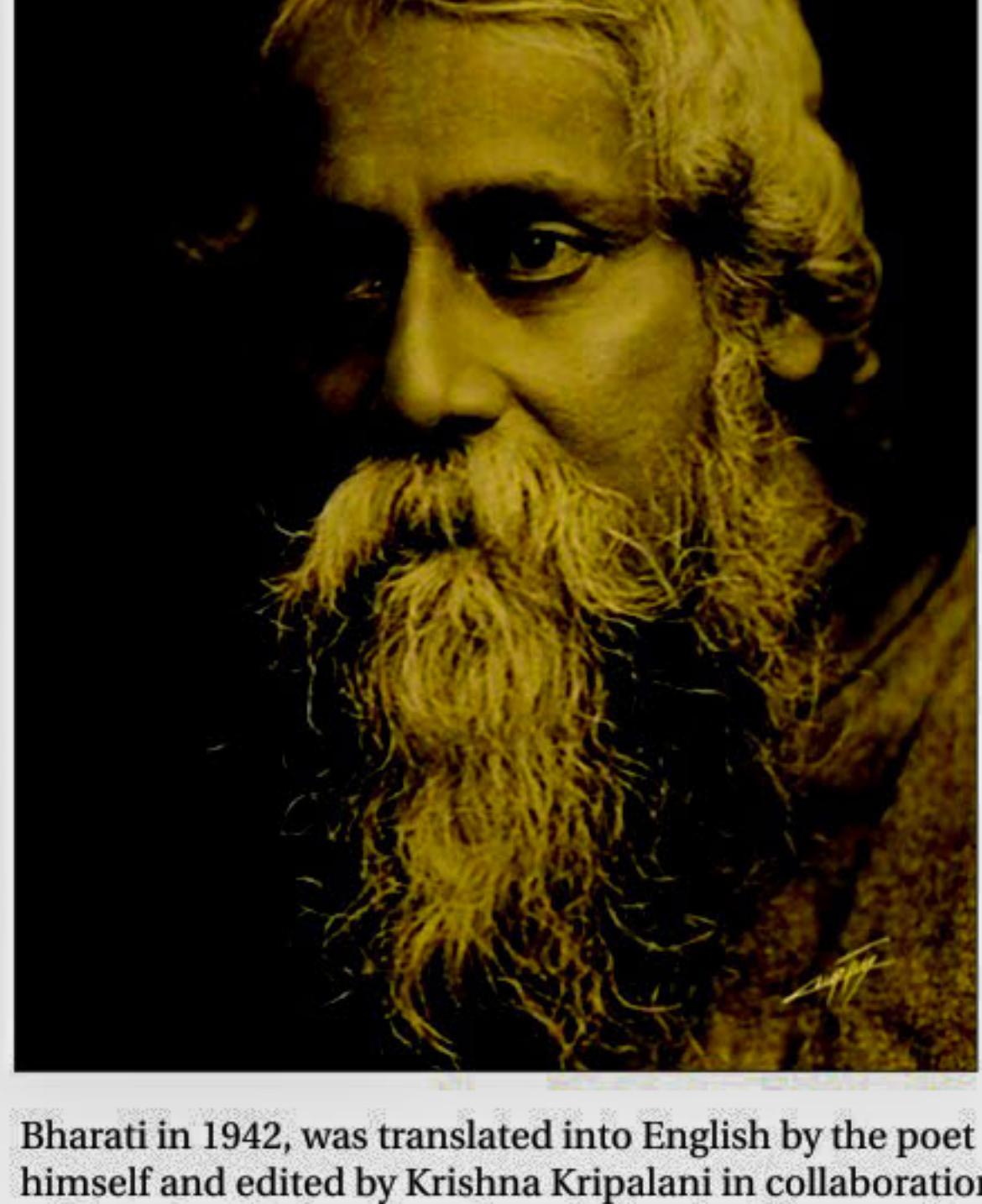
The Gardener was first published by Macmillan, London, in October 1913, and was dedicated to W. B. Yeats. It contains translations of 85 Bengali poems written earlier than the Gitanjali period. Twenty-six poems have been taken from Ksanika (1900) alone. It also picks up poems of some much earlier works like Kadi o Komal (1886) Manasi (1890) and Mayar Khela (1888). Published by Macmillan, London, in 1930, The Crescent Moon is the only work of Tagore in English where all the poems have titles. The book contains 40 poems of which 35 are selected from the Bengali work Sisu (1903). The rest of the poems are taken from Kadi o Komal (1886), Sonar Tari (1894), Ksanika (1900) and Gitimalya (1914).

Fruit-Gathering, published by Macmillan first in 1916 and then in 1918, together with Gitanjali under the title

Gitanjali and Fruit-Gathering, includes 86 poems of which more than 50 are from Gitimalya, Gitali, Utsarga, Kheya, Naivedya and Gitanjali, and the rest are from Katha and Balaka.

First published by Macmillan in 1918, Lover's Gift and Crossing is divided into two parts. The 60 poems in 'Lover's Gift' are mostly from Balaka and Ksanika and the rest from Chitra, Smaran, Kalpana, Kheya and several other sources while the 74 poems in 'Crossing' come from Naivedya, Kheya, Gitanjali, Gitimalya, and Gitali. There are, however, four poems in 'Lover's Gift', which are not Tagore's in the original. They are translated by Tagore from three other Bengali poets.

The Fugitive was first published by Macmillan in 1921. Other than the English translations of his own Bengali poems, Tagore has included here translations of 17 religious lyrics composed by others under three heads: 'Vaishnava Songs', 'Baul Songs' and 'Hindi Songs of Jnanadas'. Poems, posthumously published by Visva-



Bharati in 1942, was translated into English by the poet himself and edited by Krishna Kripalani in collaboration with Amiya Chakravarty, Nirmal Chandra Chattopadhyay and Pulimbihari Sen. The book contains 130 poems, excluding the introductory one. It is the first attempt to present Tagore's poems in the translation in chronological order. There are, however, 12 poems in this collection translated by Amiya Chakravarty.

Stray Birds is a collection of epigrams and short verses first published by Macmillan, New York, in 1916, and dedicated to T. Hara of Yokohama, the author's host in Japan during his visit in 1916. The poems included in this book were, in the first instance, taken from Kanika. The rest were written in Japan. Some scholars have found the possibility of the influence of Japanese Haiku on these poems.

First published by Macmillan, New York, in 1928,

Fireflies contains 256 epigrams and short verses some of which are translations from the Bengali and some are written originally in English.

First published by Allen and Unwin, London in 1931, The Child is the only major poem by Tagore written directly in English. The poem was written in July 1930 when Tagore visited the village of Oberammergau in Munich, Germany, to watch the traditional passion play. He later translated it into Bengali under the title Sisu Tirtha.

One Hundred Poems of Kabir is a selection of the songs of Kabir, one of the greatest saint-poets of medieval India. Being translated by Tagore, and published by India Society, London, in 1914 and reprinted by Macmillan, London and Macmillan, New York in 1917, the mystic songs of Kabir were offered to English readers for the first time. Evelyn Underhill assisted Tagore in this great work, and wrote a long introduction to it. The source of this translation work was the most authoritative book on the subject entitled Kabir by Kshitimohan Sen.

The probable date of the publication of the Bolpur edition of The Fugitive is 1919. However, in 1921, Macmillan published it after considerable modifications presumably done by Tagore himself.

Lekhan was first printed in 1926 at Balatonfured, Hungary in Tagore's handwriting. It contained 420 short verses of which 72 were in English, 48 in Bengali, and 150 had both Bengali and English versions. The pieces in English (72+150=222) were later included in Fireflies in 1928 with some changes in punctuation, diction and syntax.

Apart from the above-published works of poetry, there are some other isolated poems written and translated by Tagore on different occasions. To Shakespeare is the poet's own translation of the 16-line Bengali poem written in 1915 at the request of Shakespeare Tercentenary Celebration Committee. 'A Weary Pilgrim' was written by Tagore on his way to Japan on 3 May 1929. Appeal for Relief is Tagore's own translation of the poem which he wrote as the President of the Bengal Congress Flood and Famine Relief Committee. The Cleanser is Tagore's translation of the Bengali poem 'Methar' written by Satyendranath Datta. 'Freedom from Fear' was written on the death anniversary of Raja Rammohun Roy. Deshabandhu Chittaranjan Das is the English translation of a Bengali poem written on the inauguration ceremony of Deshabandhu Memorial. Ramakrishna Paramahansa was written on centenary celebration of the 19th century Hindu religious leader Ramakrishna. 'Speak to Me, My Friend' is the translation of a Bengali song. My Prayer for India was published in The Modern Review, August 1930. Two Poems Written in Iran are the poems presented to the Shah of Iran by Tagore during his visit there in 1902.

You have Come to Me is the translation of a Bengali song.

The fullest corpus of Tagore's poetry in English has yet to be explored. Many of his published and unpublished poems are still untraceable. However, the process of exploration is on. We look forward to fresh inquiries and investigations in this regard.

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## REMEMBRANCE

## Neruda and the power of poetry

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

When the rice withdraws from the earth  
The grains of its flour,  
When the wheat hardens its little hip-joints  
And lifts its face of a thousand hands,  
I make my way to the grove  
Where the woman and the man embrace,  
To touch the innumerable sea  
Of what continues

----- Being Born in the Woods

Let us celebrate Pablo Neruda, he who died a disappointed man in a beaten country. You could say the heart quite broke in him as he saw his country come into the grip of wolves determined to devour everything good and beautiful in Chile, and about it. Only days earlier, his good friend Salvador Allende, the committed Marxist elected to office as president of Chile in 1970, had died as the army, per courtesy of the Nixon administration and its local henchmen, blasted its way into the La Moneda presidential palace, its goal being the overthrow of the elected government. Allende died, ostensibly through committing suicide, more likely through extra-judicial execution. We will never know. It was not Chile's finest hour. In the twelve days which elapsed between the conquest of Chile by its soldiers and the death of Neruda from ailment, a whole world was reduced to ashes. "I am going", said Neruda to his wife. He then passed into the ages. And Chile, the land whose fragrance he breathed, whose colours he moulded into song, passed into darkness.

It was a life which saw the light go out of it in the manner of the prosaic. And the prosaic, all too often wrapped in the raiment of the oppressive, had forever been the demon

Neruda, the man who once was known as Neftali Reyes, had fought in his poetry. There was the quiet romantic man in him, a being who could with facility love a woman in his infinitely diverse ways:

*I want to do with you  
what spring does with the cherry trees.*

There is innocence here, and yet a perceptible presence of the sensual underlies the sentiment. It is the ravishing, or the intent of,

which defines the throbbing of the soul in Neruda. You know, somehow, that the woman waits to be touched, as the leaves wait for the breeze to stir them out of their languor.

It is the multi-faceted, the quality of it, in Neruda which holds aloft the image of the man. His was a journey through the capitals of the world. As a diplomat endlessly stepping on to foreign shores, he made sure the new land was a place he could call home. Wherever he chanced to be, it was faces he internalized, identified with. And, of course, there was the continuum in the lyrical which never quite abandoned his poetry:

*If you ask me where I have been / I must say "It so happens." / I must speak of the ground darkened by the stones / of the river that enduring is destroyed . . .*

There are the social contradictions which kept Neruda rooted to his ambience. Beyond the purely romantic, he spotted the insidiously banal, the soot and grime which ate away at the vitality of the land he inhabited. It was thus that he identified with the political Left, to take his place as an elected communist senator in the year the Second World War drew to a close. It is in the nature of communists to speak up in defence of the underprivileged. In June 1948, as Neruda read out the names of 628 people detained without any hope of justice coming by at the Pisagua concentration camp, he knew the regime of President Gabriel Gonzalez Videla would soon be on the hunt for him. The job of bringing the prisoners' plight before the world done, the poet went underground. He watched the skies, observed the plants, made friends with the insects and the birds. It was *Arte de pajaro* --- the art of birds --- that came of the experience.

The poetic man is the complete man, in communion with nature and losing himself in its warm softness, in its heaving passions:

*But you silence the great trees, and above the moon / far away above / you spy upon the sea like a thief / Oh, night, my startled soul asks you / you, desperately, about the metal that it needs . . .*

And from that story of silence, and through it, the poet tiptoes into the land where death rises in the loud silences of cemeteries:

*There are lone cemeteries / tombs full of soundless bones / the heart threading a tunnel / a dark, dark tunnel . . .*

When Pinochet's goons stormed into La Chascona, the poet's home, and went about turning the place upside down in the hope of coming by incriminating material, it was the morbidity of a culture dying that Neruda saw gleam in the soldiers' eyes. In disdain and yet in despair, he told them, "Look around --- there's only one thing of danger for you here --- poetry."

It was an afternoon when blood coursed through the streets and fields and