Non-Fiction

Prioritizing serenity

NIGHAT GANDHI

I was getting nowhere with the book. My mind, each time I sat down to write, became a thriving, bustling can of worms. The worms assumed different namesfear, doubt, laziness, anxiety, self-derisionall species familiar to blocked writers. They ate away at precious, fast-dwindling reserves of self-confidence. I thought of calling the publisher and saying, sorry, could we forget about the book?

As the worms flourished, I languished. They thrived on my despair. I was losing out to them. I was too distracted to write, trying to control my despair. For rescue, I went looking for books on Buddhism and meditation at Tibet House in Delhi. Their bookshop was closed but strangely I found myself asking about retreats for women: where could I get a room and meals and be left alone to write and meditate? Where could I daydream away my days, without appearing to be productive?

'Thosamling in Himachal Pradesh. Try it,' the director of Tibet House suggested. Thosamling? A nunnery? I saved the website as a bookmark. The worms finally pushed me to do it. I bought a ticket to Pathankot. A group of forty sari traders were my travelling companions on the train. They were on a pilgrimage to Vaishnu Devi. They crunched peanuts, drank tea, chewed gutka, and deliberated on how to sell more saris, how to make more money, and how to spend more money. The trader across from me drooled, speculating that August was going to be an exceptional month with, not one, but two shoppingpacked festivals, Rakshabandhan and Eid. His eyes took on the glazed look of a mystic's. I plugged my ears with music to brave

their garrulity. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan sang:
Talaash usko na kar buton mein/
Woh hai badalti hui ruton mein/
Jo din ko raat aur raat ko din bana raha

Wohi khuda hai Do not search for the divine in worldly beloveds/

The one who lives in the changing

rhythms of seasons/ Who transforms night into day and days into nights/

He alone is God Watery fields of paddy flitted past during the day, and at night a lonesome silver moon hovered over the tops of dark, ghostly trees. Illusions? The trees were not ghosts. The moon was not silver. The sky was not black. And most startlinglyI was not a writer.

In Pathankot I bid a wordless farewell to the sari traders who still had a few hours before reaching Jammu. On the bus to Dharamshala I sat under a brutal Bollywood thriller. Men pounded and thrashed one another on the tiny screen above my head. They made me ache for the solitude of the nunnery.

It was raining when I arrived in the village of Sidhpur. The taxi dropped me off next to a footbridge over a rushing, noisy stream. No more trains, buses, taxis and traders! Two helpers came down to carry my bags. I followed them on a narrow, winding path through terraced fields. I was balancing my umbrella and backpack and picking my steps in the wetness. I paused but the men with my bags raced on. The mist-veiled hills stopped me. They were unreal. They were grand. I felt shy in their presence, like a village bride stealing first glances at her groom.

I was shown my room and left to myself. As soon as I drew aside the curtain, it fell down. It was a sign. I had come to open the windows of my mindbest if nothing stood between me and what I had come seeking. I looked out. Looking is what I did mostly. When it stopped raining, a broad, four-striped rainbow festooned itself between the hills. The drainpipe outside my window dripped onto the gravelly garden path. The only sound was that of water. The only sight was of the rainbow-draped hills. When the rainbow vanished, I found its evanescence disquietingsuch unbearable loveliness, yet with no inherent or lasting meaning?

Behind the hills rose the mountains of the craggy, brown, snow-tipped Dhaula Dhars. They remained distant and unperturbed. The madly falling rain fell over them for days at a time, and drowned every noise and form, submerging everything in a watery mirage. Then the rain would end just as suddenly. And the sun would tinge the peaks golden. Day after day, the water rushing down terraced fields, the nightly *cheep cheep* of crickets, twinkling lights in solitary homes on the hills, the raucousness of birds at dawnand

in their midst, the utter aloneness of me. `Yet I carried the earnest certitude I

wasn't alone. I was being watched over tenderly in this journey of the soul. As I witnessed the mountains play their now I'm here, now I'm gone game, they transformed into mute gurus. They taught me the meaning of enlightenment: not losing your mountain-ness whether sun, rain or mist comes. They taught me selfacceptance. The inability to write is also part of your path, they said. Thank your restlessness: it brought you here. When mist hid the mountains, they mirrored my clouded, doubt-filled mind. When mists lifted, they became my sparkling, tranquil, creative mind. The essential mind was pure and poised if I didn't mistake the passing clouds or sunshine for the Mind.

For days, I couldn't write at all. I awakened early and went down for morning meditation with the nuns though it wasn't mandatory for laywomen. At breakfast I drank coffee and ate thick slices of warm brown bread, freshly baked, with home-ground peanut butter, jam and cheeses from Manali and chatted with residents. I met nuns and laywomen from the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, the Philippines, Taiwanfiercely independent and wise women. Between breakfast and lunch, I read books on Buddhism, copied meaningful passages, meditated, and gaped at the mountains. Lunch I ate alone, and dinner I renounced. This minor deprivation improved my meditation as well as my digestion!

I wasn't far enough from civilization. There was enough to do for spiritual tourists in nearby Dharamshala and Mcleodganj: Tibetan medicine, massage clinics, teachings by lamas and even the Dalai Lama, films on Buddhism, supermarkets and trendy cafes. But, compelled by some wordless weightiness, I stayed put at the nunnery, going out for occasional walks. I preferred movie nights at the nunnery to sightseeing. When I ventured into town I felt exhausted by people, cars and the busyness of commerce. My cool, sparsely adorned room at Thosamling beckoned like a waiting mother.

Only silent recollection can encapsulate the unspeakable beauty of those inwardturning momentsI, puny, perishable me, in

nunnery in the foothills of the Himalayas, puzzling over the meaning of my existence, demanding from myself a definition of myself. It was impressive and pitiable. The mountains, their constant companionship, the solitude and the immeasurable peace they filled me with, finally thawed my thoughts. I began to unearth muchoverlooked treasures of my own mind. I began to approach my writing with a sense of spacious emptiness, with expectations of neither failure nor grandeur. The wormsfear, doubt, anxiety, laziness, selfloathingretreated. The writing became less laborious. Serenity became my only priority. I proposed a 500 words/day target for myself but decided not to chide myself if I didn't attain it.

the vastness of a cold moonlit night in a

I completed the first draft of a chapter three days before my self-suggested deadline, probably because I managed to hold back all judgment. My month at Thosamling passed with slow dignity. I rarely felt bored or anxious. Like the book of life, my book is still not done, but at least one chapter was written. I left feeling clearer and calmer, knowing Thosamling would welcome me if the worms came out of hiding again.

A NUNNERY LIKE NONE OTHER
In the words of its founder Ani Sangmo, a
nun from the Netherlands, "Thosamling
means a place to listen and contemplate.
Thosamling provides a home for Buddhist
women who want to contemplate, do
retreats, or study under the guidance of a
qualified Tibetan Teacher. It is the first
nunnery for international nuns and
Buddhist women in India."
Thosamling Nunnery is located in the
picturesque village of Sidhpur, near
Dharamshala, at the foot of the Dhauladhar
mountain range, in Himachal Pradesh,
India. It is possible to do short and long

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mountain range, in Himachal Pradesh,
India. It is possible to do short and long
retreats at the nunnery. Boarding and
lodging are provided at affordable rates.
Nutritious vegetarian meals and delectable
baked goodies are prepared on site. A very
friendly staff does everything to make your
stay as rewarding as possible. More info at
www.thosamling.com or email

thosamling@gmail.com

Nighat Gandhi writes from India.

ESSAY

In his literary world...

TUSAR TALUKDER

Fakrul Alam, a prominent literary figure in Bangladesh, writes in English. More specifically, he has a particular fascination for post-colonial English literature. He attempts to show us through his essays how a number of writers of the post-colonial era have attempted to bring forth problems deeply rooted in the social structure.

Let me begin by a brief discussion of The

Essential Tagore, published by Harvard University Press this year to mark the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth. In what is the largest single volume of Tagore's works available in English, Professor Alam has translated one letter, two essays, thirty-one poems and sixty-one songs from Rabindranath Tagore's wide repertoire of literary works. In a review Sharmila Sen, a renowned critic and professor of American literature and language, says Alam's translations are very fresh and crisp. To capture the whole essence of the bard, The Essential Tagore (edited by Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakrabarty) attempts to focus on his extraordinary achievements in numerous genres. The book is divided into ten sections so that English-speaking readers can have a fuller and more accurate sense of Tagore literature. Translations for this volume have been contributed by Tagore specialists of international stature, notably Fakrul Alam, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri and Sunetra Gupta. Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate, has an appreciative note on the work: "In rising to this challenge, the editors and translators of The Essential Tagore have done a splendid job of producing a beautiful volume of selections from Tagore's vast body of writings." As a translator Fakrul Alam is a marked difference from his contemporaries in South Asia.

Alam's first book of essays, Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English, was published in 2007. On first going through the work, this writer noted the lyrical quality of Alam's sentences along with his style of developing them. He is distinctive in selecting words and forming sentences. Obscurity is absent in his writing; the sentences flow along a lyrical tone in the essays. He never tries to lengthen his sentences unnecessarily. The thoughts expressed in his essays are logically developed. The extensive use of connotative



words assists him in bringing forth a wide range of themes in a few sentences. But this does not hold him back from revealing the required information. Alam invariably attempts to place words in his essays in such a way that readers are not confused about the possible meaning. The unique power of using words appropriately gives him a special capability of discovering the inner strength of a word.

Fakrul Alam endeavours to research the works of Indians writing in English. He has extensively written on V S Naipaul, Nirad C Choudhuri, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. Fakrul Alam has written on a variety of themes, never hesitating to put credible information in his essays. For instance, while writing on Nirad C Choudhuri, Alam is frank with his opinions. Without any hesitation, he has attempted to draw out the positive aspects of Choudhuri's contribution to literature. Though Choudhuri has been much derided by literati in South Asia owing to his appreciation of the British legacy in India, Alam puts across to readers the possible reasons behind Choudhuri's position regarding British rule. But here it is relevant to mention that Professor Alam does not agree all the way with Choudhuri.

From the very beginning of Professor
Alam's literary career, his area of interest
has been R.K. Narayan's stories and his
prose style. The reason behind Alam's
special fascination for Narayan may be
spotted in his long term teaching of
Narayan's texts to his students. Fakrul Alam
considers Narayan as a 'born story teller'
with no fascination for complex socio-

economic issues. In an essay, Alam dwells on the exclusiveness of handling various narrative perspectives and craftsmanship in Narayan as a fiction writer. Furthermore, Alam's extensive analysis of two novels, The Financial Expert and The Guide, has helped readers as well as critics in not considering Narayan merely as a plain writer without any art. Here one cannot resist quoting a line used by Alam to describe Narayan's substantiality as a writer: "R. K. Narayan is a major novelist who has, as Yeats put it in another context so long ago, laboured to be beautiful".

Perhaps Alam is the first Bangladeshiborn English writer who has dealt with Edward Said's most quintessential theory, Orientalism. Clearly enough, no other critic in South Asia has been as successful as Alam in discussing Said's theory elaborately. He has two essays on Edward Said. While writing on Bharati Mukherjee, Alam clarifies to readers the prime motifs behind Mukherjee's literary concepts, such as how immigration helps people rediscover lives, how people feel helpless after they have left their own countries. Mukherjee's aversion to multiculturalism, her handling of social and psychological realism, her overemphasis on successes and failures of South Asian immigrants in North America, her tendency to avoid race distinctions in American society and, overall, her true depiction of the openness of American society have been revealed in Alam's essay, Migration and Settlement in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction.

To acquaint non-Bengali readers with the richness of Jibanananda Das' poetry, Alam undertook the task of translating Das into English. When Alam's volume Jibanananda Das: Selected Poems came out in 1999 on the occasion of the poet's birth centenary, it was received with widespread acclaim. He thinks that after Tagore, Das is one great literary figure whose poetry can be reasonably appreciated even in translation. In the essay On Translating Jibanananda Das's Poetry, Alam briefly discusses the nature of the poetry and why his English version of Das is distinctive from other translators. Fakrul Alam notes that Das assimilated 'the early Yeats fully in evoking a world suffused with melancholy and tinged with death'. Readers from outside the Bengali-speaking world will have some information regarding Das' views on

translations of his poems by both Das

himself and others. For instance, when Das sent his poem 'Darkness' for publication in a bilingual issue of Kavita, of which Buddhadeva Bose was editor, Bose suggested some changes in Das' translation especially in relation to Das' use of Bengali names in the English version of the poem. Das, writing to Bose, pointed out that 'these Bengali names had some special connotations which would be lost if English equivalents were used'. Furthermore, Das states that Bengali readers of the English version could be confused if Bengali names were changed. Against this historical background, it can be said that Alam has brilliantly translated Das' poems, keeping the Bengali terms unchanged. Moreover, Alam has added a glossary at the end of his English version of Das' poetry to provide both Bengali and non-Bengali readers with a full account of the connotations of Bengali words used by Das. Professor Alam has expressed his dissatisfaction with some translators' work on Das's poetry. Chidananda Dasgupta's book of translation comes to mind. Alam declares that Dasgupta has unnecessarily used some awkward phrases to indicate a number of Das' Bengali expressions.

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On Clinton B Seely's translation of Das,
Fakrul Alam asserts that Seely has denied
the tonal and formal qualities of Das'
poetry. However, Alam also recommends
that those who for the first time will go
forth to translate Das' poems ought to read
Seely's translation with much care. Fakrul
Alam confesses in his essay that he has
captured 'at least a bit of the lyrical beauty
of the original'. The eminent litterateur
Syed Manzoorul Islam appreciates Fakrul

Alam as a successful translator of Das thus:

"The sights and sounds of Bengal's
landscape, its crowded botany and its
constantly shifting lights and shadows find
their way into Alam's translation. For a
reader not accustomed to the kind of
intense lyricism and pervasive nostalgia
that Jibanananda's poems display, Alam's
translation comes through without any
distortion or awkwardness".

Alam's richness as a translator, his powers as an essayist and his sense of proportion about the use of words give him an exclusiveness make him amidst his contemporaries writing in English.

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Dream

(Swapna from 'Kalpana')
RABINDRANATH TAGORE
Translation MD SHAHIDUL ISLAM MIAH

Far, far away
In a realm of dream, in *Ujjaini* city

By the river Shipra's bank did I go along once
Looking for my first-love
From a previous life:

Lodhra-pollen dabbed on her face,
Playful-lotus in her hands,
Ear-ends bedecked with Kunda's buds,
Her hair did Kurubok adorn.
Wrapping her slender form was a sari deepred,
Knotted on the waist.
Faintly rang her anklet-bells,
As she paced.

In a sombre strain,
Bells were tolling for the Evening-rite.
Arcades empty: above the darkened heights,
Evening-sun had cast a dusky-light.

There it was my beloved's home:
Down the winding alley-ways narrow,

I wandered far across, finding my way.

In the temple of Mahakala then,

On this spring-time day,

Lay remote and lone.
Etched on the door:
Signs of conch shell, wheel, it bore.
On either side, a pair
Of *Kadamba* saplings grew like sons
In love and care.

Above the gateway's columns here,

Looking so solemn a lion's statue,
Sat with a commanding-sneer.
Those her pets, my beloved's doves,
To their dovecote, all were back.
The peacock was already asleep,
Perched on a golden rack.

Lamp of a flickering-flame, in hand,

Lamp of a flickering-flame, in hand,
Walking with grace,
Now came descending my *Malavika*,
At a gentle pace.
Appearing as she did, above the stairs,
Out of the door thus far,
Like the evening's goddess, a *Laxmi* she looked,
Holding the evening star.

Saffron-scent that perfumed her body,

And resinous incense blowing from her hair,
In a whiff of a restless breath,
Caught me entire.
A careless fall of her wee-bit loosened attire,
Did, in a twinkling, render bare
Her bosom on the left,
While sight was caught of patterns on the
breast,
Marked with the sandal-paste.
Like a deity's form, there she stood,
In that hum-of-the-city-gone-hushed-anevening's

At the sight of me,
Slowly did she,
Lower and place her lamp by the door.
Putting her hand in mine,
"My friend, are you fine?"
This her sad eyes seemed to enquire.

Quietened mood.

Looking at her face, I tried to speak,
But not a word did I find.
Lost to us was the language we spoke:
And for each other's name we groped and groped,
And nothing would come to our mind.

We two kept on thinking for long, Gazing at each other there, Our eyes went streaming with tears Keeping an unblinking stare.

We two mused and mused so hard,
Beneath the tree that stood by the door:
Taken so unawares, I knew not
When, on whatever pretext,
Her soft hand came sliding into my right
hand,
As if to nestle and rest,

Like a bird at the hour of dusk seeking its

Gently her face,
Like some lotus drooping its stalk,
Came down to rest
Upon my breast.
Passionate and vacant,
Her breath over mine so fell

And mingled in a silent spell.

nest.

Darkness of night,
Fusing in its fold all things together,
Wiped out *Ujjaini*, out of sight.
Suddenly a gust of wind
Blew out the lamp that lay by the door.
And on the bank of the *Shipra*-river,
In the temple of *Shiva* then,
The evening-rites of *Arati*,
Came to an abrupt end.

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