

IN THE REALMS OF GOLD

# Keats: "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"

FAKRUL ALAM

The first time I had to judge books formally was when I became a member of the jury for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize in 2004. I was thrilled to be adjudicating such a prize, even though I was judge only for the Eurasia region (there are four regions in this competition: Africa, Canada and the Caribbean, Eurasia, South East Asia and the South Pacific; the regional winners are eventually considered for the award later). However, I soon found out that while the idea of being a judge is thrilling, the judging process itself is quite demanding. If my memory serves me right the three of us in the Eurasian jury (Professor Sanjukta Das Gupta of the University of Calcutta, and Maya Jaggi, of the literary page of the British newspaper The Guardian, were my co-judges) had to read 108 books in just about four month's time. I remember that while I had set out to devour all the books initially I soon found comfort in Bacon's worldly-wise observation of ways of managing one's reading in his classic essay, "Of Studies": "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some few to be chewed and digested, that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence, and attention". Adopting Bacon's method, at the end of my reading I could claim that I had tasted about fifty books, swallowed about thirty-five or so of them, and chewed and digested the rest. The books that I read really diligently and with rapt attention were of course the ones I had short-listed. When we met as a jury in Kolkata's Tollygunge Club we brought along the best of these short-listed books. Then in one day of intense negotiation we chose the winners from them: Mark Haddon's brilliant book about an autistic child, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, we agreed merited the Best First Book Prize while Caryl Phillip's sensitively rendered tragic tale of an African man's death in an English village, *A Distant Shore*, impressed us as the book most deserving of the Best Book of the Year Award. I should add that the process of arriving at these choices

was not an easy one. After all, there were at least a few other works in our individual short-lists that had their claims to be made the "best" book in these two categories, though we certainly did not feel the same way about all of them. But it was a great feeling to be present in the delightfully preserved Bengal Club of Kolkata where the winners were announced. And as jurors of our region we felt vindicated in our final choices when some months later our selections were announced overall winners of the Commonwealth Prize in the "Best First Book" and "Best Book of the Year" categories at the Sydney Literary Festival later that year.

I recall now that among the 108 books we were asked to judge for the 2004 Commonwealth Prize for Eurasia, no more than 12 were from South Asia. Even though by 2004 the region had produced Booker prize winners like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, and even though quite a few writers of the region had received the Commonwealth Writers Prize in both categories by then (the Bangladeshi-Australian novelist Adib Khan had won the prize in the "Best First Book" category in 1995 for his novel *Seasonal Adjustments*), my experience of judging English fiction emanating from the sub-continent that year indicated to me that only a handful of books in English were coming out from our part of the world at this time. Moreover, it was obvious that there was not much quality writing in the language that could attract worldwide attention then.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, at discovering the big change in the volume of South Asian writing when I was invited to become a judge of the 2nd DSC Prize for South Asian Literature earlier this year, for when I opened the package of books sent to me I found I had 52 of them to evaluate! These works are "South Asian" according to the eligibility criteria of the prize since they are either by writers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan (although there were no entries from the Maldives and Bhutan this year) or are by diasporic writers who have roots in our part of the world. However, in the DSC Prize even

non-South Asian writers who have set their tales in the region are eligible for the award (there were two such submissions this year). Evidently, publishers have discovered by now that there is quite a market for English-language fiction with South Asian content. I found it interesting to note too from the books sent to me that not only were established publishing houses like Penguin and Harper Collins marketing any number of works of fiction set in South Asia, or about South Asians at home or abroad, but that independent Indian publishers like Kali and Rupa had also submitted entries for the competition. Obviously, interest in South Asian writing has been growing exponentially in recent years! Surely, it is this boom in South Asian Writing and the improvement in the overall quality as well as the increase in quantity that prompted DSC Limited, a massive Indian infrastructure and construction company, to award a hefty prize for the best work in creative writing coming out of the region annually (the prize money is substantial at US \$50000!) The brain child of the family that owns DSC, prominent among whom are Manhad and Surian Narula, the prize is announced in the Jaipur Literary Festival that takes place in the Indian city every January, an event also sponsored by the company. I was thus part of an event much larger than the prize itself!

For this book prize I was co-judging submissions along with four other judges: Alastair Niven from Britain, Marie Brenner from USA, Faiza S. Khan from Pakistan, and Ira Pande from India, who is also the Chair of this year's panel. Our task, we learned, was to arrive at the winner in three phases. Going through the 52 books sent to us in late May, we first had to arrive at a long-list of 15-16 books by the second week of September. Come September 9, then, we emailed our long-lists to Mrs. Pande, who for her part, collated them and came up with a list of 16 books that she sent to us a few days later. We were then asked to reread these books so that we could produce a shortlist of 5-6 books when we were to meet in London in late October. And so we judges met in an elegant hotel with a Victorian facade and nineteenth century

type furnishings owned by the DSC Group in London's South Kensington borough on the 23rd of October to cut down the long list to a short one. Although there were some excellent books in the long-list like the Nepalese novelist Samrat Upadhyay's vivid evocation of a Kathmandu-based love affair, Buddha's Orphans, the Indian writer Siddarth Chowdhury's at times ribald portrait of the artist as a young man in Delhi, Day Scholar, and the Goncourt Prize winning Afghani tale of a woman having to cope with a war that is bleeding humanity in her country, The Patience Stone, that we debated about for a while, it took us three hours or so to arrive at our short list: Chinaman, the ingenious, sprawling, irreverent spin on Sri Lankan cricket by Shehan Karunatilaka, *The Story that Must Not Be Told*; Kavery Nambisan's thought-provoking tale of contemporary India where sprawling slums bursting with life but reeking of problems lie next to sleekly built housing estates; *Monkey-Man*, a deft and lively portrait of the tensions generated in people by the pace of life in fast-developing Bangalore (now Bengaluru!) by Usha K. R.; and Tabish Khair's postmodern postcolonial tale set for the most part in Victorian London that has a unique take on thuggery and the heart of darkness occluded by those who espouse reason, *The Thing about Thugs*, are four of the six books that we singled out. The other two books in our short list are translations (the DSC rules enable such books to be considered for the prize): the major Indian writer U. R. Ananthamurthy's classic novel about an idealist trying to take on the caste system in South India head-on, *Bharatipura*, and the simply told but delightful portrait of a para in Kashmir's most famous city that is another version of paradise lost, *A Street in Srinagar*. These books we considered good enough in their English translations to compete with the other four books written originally in that language. The short-list was announced to the media in a glittering (if not entirely glitch-free) event organized in no less a place than London's resurrected Globe Theatre. It was good to be there to experience the buzz created by the

prize. The organizers had done their best to make the event a grand one and throughout the evening the champagne kept flowing and the conversation got more and more animated. I also got my first taste of London's literary life and I think that I even got glimpses of the city's glitterati. But most of all I felt happy knowing that us jurors had done our part well in making such a dazzling event possible. Because between mid-June to early September I had read an average 200 pages a day in arriving at the long list, I consider my next duty as a judge of the DSC to be an easy one. For all we have to do as judges when we meet in Jaipur on January 22nd is to choose the winner so that it can be declared the next day at the Jaipur Literary Festival. This should be a breeze even though at the moment I can't make up my mind about which of the three books I really, really like in the short-list should be the winner. Judging books in book awards, I know by now, is not easy not merely for the sheer bulk of the work but also for the difficult choices one has to make again and again. However, the compensations are many: the honorarium one gets is not negligible but the honor of judging is much more gratifying; one gets to own a few dozens books which arrive one day at the outset of the competition as if by windfall; binging in books for a period after having to cut down on them for years because of professional work is entirely satisfying; and interacting with the other judges in pleasing milieus is definitely a bonus. But the greatest satisfaction of being a judge in these book prizes is the opportunity they give us jury members to traverse realms of gold and to encounter at the end at least a few wonderful works that take us, as did Keats when he read Chapman's Homer, into vantage points from where one can view some of the best insights into life and representation of societies past and present created by gifted contemporary writers.

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TRIBUTE

## Rashid Karim: voice of modern fiction

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

This is the way the world ends, warns one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. It ends not with a bang but a whimper.

Rashid Karim, one of our finest novelists, a brilliantly creative man during his youth, in middle age and in early old age, died at the age of eighty six last week, having battled paralysis for the last nineteen years. He could not write a single word during that long period, usually quite productive for a writer. Rabindranath Tagore and Leo Tolstoy are bright examples.

Rashid Karm was born in Kolkata in 1925. He did his BA from the Calcutta Islamia College. After the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, his family moved to Dhaka.

He began writing during the British period, continued during the Pakistan period but wrote his major novels during the Bangladesh period. It was in independent Bangladesh that his career as a writer reached its zenith.

Rashid Karim penned his first story at the age of fourteen. So he began quite early. But his first story was published in 1942 in Mohammed Nasiruddin's *Saogat*. After that he did not write till 1961, when began the second phase of his writing career. His first novel *Utam Purush* was published that year. It made him widely known and brought him the prestigious Adamjee Award. Two years later *Prashanna Pashan* instantly turned him into a major novelist of the Bangla language. Again he went into hibernation, this time for a decade.

After the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, he published his epic novel, *Amar Jato Glani*, in 1973. This novel helped his fame reach its peak. Till this period he was known as a gifted writer who wrote less but wrote very well. But from then on he wrote and published regularly. *Prem Ekti Lal Golap* was published in 1978.

Rashid Karim wrote *Ekaler Rupkatha*, *Sonar Patharhati*, *Baroi Nishanga*, *Mayer Kachhe Jachchi* and a few other novels during the next decade. *Lunch Box* and two other novels were published in the early 1990s. He also has a collection of well-written short stories, *Prothom Prem*, and three books of essays.

Rashid Karim, younger brother of Abu Rusud, another major Bangladeshi novelist, primarily painted the middle class society of Calcutta and



Dhaka. His characters are urban people. He dealt with the period from the 1930s to the 1980s. We get a glimpse of village life for a short while in some of his novels but there is no detailed description of village life anywhere. At the same time he is at ease dealing with the subconscious mind of the characters more than their actions or society itself. *Amar Jato Glani* is perhaps his masterpiece. He successfully uses the stream of consciousness method in this novel. He follows the personal experience of the male protagonist in the socio-political milieu of the novel. The psycho-analysis is splendid here.

*Prem Ekti Lal Golap* is also one of his most accomplished novels. The actions and the subconscious thoughts of the characters are mingled brilliantly. Rashid Karim is at his creative best here. However, the novels in the final phase of his career appear to be a little repetitive. Autobiographical elements appear regularly in his novels. But he has the enviable ability of turning them into sublime art.

Rashid Karim was a close friend of Shamsur Rahman, Bangladesh's premier modern poet. He was himself a noted modern voice of Bangla fiction. No one wrote better about the modern urban man. No one explored the inner soul of man so carefully and with such compassion.

Junaidul Haque writes fiction and is an essayist.

FICTION

## The cruel conflict

HAROONUZZAMAN

Shojib is surprised to see the door unlatched. The door creaks as he pushes it open. The midnight breeze blowing across brings in a sweet smell as he stands on the balcony. The lights of the dining room are switched on, and from the balcony he sees sleepless Rehana in a crumpled up sari standing in the middle of the narrow corridor that connects the dining space with the balcony. For a minute or two they keep looking at each other with their eyes wide open. Then she walks clumsily to him and leans her body against his broad shoulder. He gets a feeling that a roach is slowly creeping up from his feet. Holding her straight by his hands, Shojib mutters: "What happened? Why didn't you sleep?"

"I'll go back. I don't want to stay here anymore. Please take me home." Teary-eyed Rehana pleads while unearthing the secrets of her sufferings. As Shojib tries to wipe off her teardrops with his fingers, some of them fall on the dusty floor. Placing his palm under her chin, he raises her downcast head.

"Don't be upset, my dear. Everything will be all right." To assuage her pangs, he sweetly says.

The roach is gradually creeping up on him, and he begins to feel the smell of flowers, unexpectedly becoming stronger and then slowly turning stinky. He feels like throwing up. Finally, he takes a bath to get rid of the uneasiness.

"It's not good to take a bath late at night. You'll catch cold." Emerging from the bathroom, Shojib listens to his elder brother Badrul's concern, sounding genuine to him.

Ascertaining that the voice is coming from a closer distance, Shojib inquiringly says:

"Has there been a room change?"

"Wreaths have been exchanged. Shouldn't there be a room change?" Astringly Rehana says.

Rebeca, Shojib's loving sister, has got married. She must be in her red Benarasi, and she must have had her face done up by some lovely red and white dots! But Shojib doesn't feel like looking at her.

"Where is Firoj Bhai? Is he home?" Shojib indicates to Rehana to take from him the towel he has been wiping his head with. She wonders how Shojib is so cool listening to such news!

"He's not been home for two days also." Sorrowfully she lets him know while laying the table and serving him fried rice and chicken roast. The food coupled with her care brings about an energizing change in him; surprisingly, though, the burning sensation is continuing in his body. Somehow he gulps down one or two morsels, and when he gets up to leave, Rehana catches his hand and pleads: "Please don't go. Finish your meal and then go." Kissing her hand, he, however, manages to escape from her clutches to the balcony where he starts smoking. While arranging the leftovers and putting things in order, she says: "Your bed is in the drawing room." Before retiring to her bed, she looks back at him from in front of the washroom door and adds: "Tell me if you need anything."

*He needs something, but he doesn't know what that is!* Lying on the bed, he keeps looking at the figurative design created in the ceiling of the room by the tinge of the soft light of the next room coming through the serrated ventilator. Then he keeps turning from one side to another in bed in futile attempts to induce sleep. Now he feels that the roach that was creeping up from his feet some time back is no longer there. But the smell of the flowers returns, though it is not provoking any putrid smell this time. He breathes in the flowery smell deep into his heart. Simultaneously, he feels a strong craving for *futchka*

building up in him. At the same time he is having a gastric pain. The hunger and pain together create an explosive situation, and in a flash, he sits up on the bed looking at the open door where under the mellowed moonlight Rehana keeps standing, waiting for approval, with the mosquito net in her hands.

"Come in."

"Turn the lights on."

"It's too hot already."

There are no lights. Getting up from bed he opens the southern window to let some more moonbeams barge in.

"Yes, mosquitoes and too much heat." Rehana stands in the middle of the room crisscrossed by the natural light and shade. This is the first time Rehana also feels that her nose is tickled by some kind of a smell.

"Are you getting the smell of sweet and sour mangoes?"

Sniffing, she asks Shojib.

"*Futchka*. So tasty! I feel like eating it now."

Like the petals of a budding flower, Rehana's lips wait for the succulent and mouth-watering food.

"Sweet and sour mangoes. So delicious! So many days I haven't had them."

With accumulated anger and hunger Shojib, like the poverty-afflicted people of the third-world, pounces on Rehana, and they go into an ecstasy.

When the night slowly advances toward dawn, relaxed Shojib wakes up only to find Rehana missing in bed. The tranquilizing impact induces him to sleep for another round, and when he gets up, the sun is in its full fury already. A breeze blowing across caresses his body as he stands near the window. Along with the zephyr come wafting the wails.

*There isn't any anger or hunger; why is someone crying somewhere?*

Taken aback, Shojib tries to find out its source. Donning a Punjabi, he descends the stairs in a hurry, and he spots the source as he stands on the empty lawn. In chorus, a lot of people, bereaved, stunned and infuriated, are bawling incessantly. Nervous Shojib shouts: "Who cries? Where?"

Meanwhile, four young men, carrying a *khatia*, quickly pass through the lawn to go upstairs.

"Listen. Who are you? Where are you going?" Shojib shouts out the questions into the air as the youths keep climbing the stairs not answering. Following them, Shojib also goes up, and when he reaches in front of the main door of the eighth floor, he identifies the voices: Rebeca, Ruma, Shuma and Numa are howling in grief.

Jotsna is sniveling and saying: "Renu didn't die. I don't believe. She has been killed."

Rakib is wailing and saying: "I'll call the police. My sister didn't commit suicide. This is a cold-blooded murder."

Only Badrul is unusually calm. Neither is he fretting or screaming. This is the first time Shojib doesn't feel like facing the situation. He leaves the place unnoticed.

He steps out into the newly bitumen-laid street at the Kakrail roundabout, and at midday, he feels he needs a shoulder to lean on. Rueil Shojib gives in to a torrent of tears. But he can't understand what it is for.

(This is the third and final segment of this short story)

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