

PEREGRINATIONS

Land of magic

This write-up is the first of a two-part article Star Literature means to carry for its readers. It first appeared in 'East Pakistan Review: An Anthology', published in Karachi in 1958.

---Literary Editor

SYED NAJMUDDIN HASHIM

In ten years' stay in Karachi, I had never been allowed to forget for long the current myths about our home province East Pakistan --- now Bangladesh. They ranged from weird suggestions of Black Magic to banal hints about man-eaters and pythons in Dhaka. My sweeper woman, for example, after much hemming and hawing, once ventured the remark that like all 'Bengali Babus' I too must be a great *jadugar*, a magician. Her eyes bristling with anger at some errant Romeo, she entreated me, "Teach me, please, to turn at least one man into a pig". It was a sticky moment, but I got over that one by saying, with appropriate gravity, "The secret can not be theirs who know not how to put away mundane things and worldly emotions such as greed, anger, etc., etc."

Then there were those of our middle class friends, mostly displaced from Northern India, who harkened back most nostalgically to the little Kaminis and Draupadis in their primary classrooms and talk of the magic in their coal-black eyes and dark tresses. To them Black Magic was the property of Bengali women. But this was nothing unusual, for the same refrain is found in the songs sung by women in Bangladesh. The belles of Chittagong complain of the snares Burmese women spread with their intricate coiffure for the unwary 'Naujawans of Chatiga' (local name for Chittagong). On a winter's night, when the flickering lights from the oil lamps weave a dream-tracery on the sluggish waters of the Old Brahmaputra, the chant of the women can be heard from a boat convoy ---

"Oh, tell me, priceless sister-in-law, Why do our men marry?" After recounting their heartless desertion of hearth and home for a living across the Garo Hills, the complaint beats like the ceaseless downpour in the foothills: "For Assam runs the sea".

Here not only the wiles of crafty Assamese women are blamed, but with an unusual sense of reality, the entire land appears as a brooding monster swallowing up men of the Mymensingh belt. To clinch matters, young men also threaten in their songs that if brides are not found for them they will leave home and go away to distant Assam and Rangoon.

Having brushed aside all such misconceptions, some of them touchingly flattering to our 'Land of Magic', we are left with one which we cannot honestly disown. That Bangladesh is a land of music lovers.

One finds hard put to it to find a single person, however rude and unlettered, who does not react to some form of music or other. The rolling rivers, the gathering clouds, the swaying forests, the undulating rice in the fields, the mist-laden mornings and the perfume-drunk dusk, all keep time to an enveloping overwhelming orchestra of grand music, a tumultuous chorus of man, nature and beast.

Every occasion and event, whether it be floods, famine, the Bhawal Sannyasi Impersonation Case or the general elections, gives birth to a host of songs set to age-old tunes.

In Faridpur, I heard a ten-year old boy sing a United Front ballad in the folksy

heroic style of the song cycles about Sohrab-Rustam or the Karbala heroes. In this particular case, the local *pahelwan* was Mohan Mia (the local United Front candidate).

"Whom shall I tell my tale of woe? The mighty hordes have fallen in battle and none to bury them. The world conqueror Mohan Mia, the militant hero, is swinging his adversary, Abdul Ali Moulana, over his head." It is just an adaptation of the events which the popular imagination associates with the exploits of ancient heroes.

Whatever is big in effect extracts a tribute from the songwriter. Even the mosquito-toes of Dhaka city with their redoubtable sting gave rise to songs about five decades back and were printed in the local broad-sheet *Chabuk* (The Whip).

There is a class in Dhaka city, justly famous for their musical sense --- the band of little urchins--- who under the hawk eyes of a fiddle-wielding mason, beat the housetops into shape and break



The writer

the monotony of the lifelong day with their singsong chant. Mostly they are ribald, amorous songs, but one that I remember complained to the master of the erratic behaviour of his clock, which races to 10 a.m. so soon, but lingers on and never seems to announce 5 p.m., which is knocking off time. It voiced the suspicion that the employer had pulled a fast one on them by winding the clock the wrong way round.

I have purposely chosen these low brow examples to emphasise the fundamentally democratic content of our musical tradition. The close proximity of our songs to the day-to-day life of the peasant and labourer is at once the source of our strength and our weakness, our distinctive trait which marks us off from the Calcutta tradition (which again is distinct from the robust folk tradition of West Bengal's countryside). It has given birth to a thousand lyrics and ballads which may be too strong for the delicate stomach of polite society. Yet for the same reason it rises to the sublime heights of simple profundity in Lalan Fakir. Madan Fakir is comparable to the best of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittshahi.

Rabindranath Tagore quoted Shaikh Madan Fakir in his presidential address before the All-India Philosophical Congress -

-- "My restless heart, you would make flowers bloom, release the perfume in reckless hurry. See how my great Preceptor has through the ages unhurriedly made the buds come to life." Lalan Fakir has it thus --- "Next to my house is the City of Mirrors.

There lives one of my neighbours, but, woe is me! For I have never been able to catch a glimpse of him."

In the Comilla countryside, mendicants sing lyrics of Mathachhila Fakir (the bald-headed or shaven-headed Fakir).

"Hearken, my heart of stone. I do not know the meaning of dedicated devotion. For I came to weed out the field and instead of the weed I reaped the unripe rice. The wise ask me, 'What have you done, fool? Can you now live on grass instead of rice? Can the hilsa (palla fish) live in a stagnant pool? Can you ripen the jackfruit with blows? And whoever heard of the honeybee hiving in the hornet's nest?'"

The same bard sings of the human body as a tent strung on arteries and veins and covered with a canopy of skin and talks of the thief that enters this fine tabernacle to steal the richest gem.

"In the betel nut grove comes the noiseless bat and in the darkness of the night steals away with the fruit."

Pagla (mad) Kanai talks of man as a queer boat fashioned by its Creator that sails not on the waters but travels on land propelled by two oars and manned by the six senses, who on the day of the Deluge will abandon the vessel, leaving it to founder on the highland. He invokes the boatman not to let go of the rudder in that moment of crisis and to fight the furies so that the boat does not completely go under.

So it goes on, running through much of the folk songs, ranging from the Murshidi to the Bhatiali, the same strain of mystic longing, spiritual questionings, the madness that longs to know and be one with the unidentifiable. It has been said with much truth that the average Bengali villager, because of his innate bent of mind, the setting in which he is born and lives, always demands some spiritual fare even in the most worldly and prosaic things. No song is deemed of a high order if it does not contain suggestions of the larger world that lies beyond our ken. It is as if the untutored millions, pondering on the dark mysteries that surround them, and watching the mighty moods of a capricious culture have rediscovered the meaning of their origin and final destiny.

"But trailing clouds of glory do we come from God, who is our home . . ." Because of the proximity of this world to the other larger universe, of which this earth is only a visible part, the songs and music of the bard and the lyricist show a queer symbolism, the words throb with multiple shades of meaning. The images quarried from day to day habits and happenings become the vehicle of the most abstruse philosophy worked out through individual meditation. Not always are the ways of God justifiable to these Fakirs and hence they are known often as *Beshara* fakirs. The teachings of the Holy Book may or may not corroborate their individual findings, but the stress is on the individual quest for and realization of Truth. (Will continue next week).

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ESSAY

Gain and loss . . . on a different note

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

In the continuity of life, the pendulum keeps on moving from side to side to keep its balance. Nevertheless, at some point it tends to tilt toward one end or the other, awakening one to the reality all around. Time changes, circumstances change, attitudes, beliefs, all change. In other words, a new and rather different atmosphere is created, one that demands if not adjustment but at least a recognition of those changes. To some it is a social upheaval, to others it is in a normal phase of transition that takes place in any society. Perception varies from person to person. So do our fascination, preferences, acceptance and rejection of the same. Under the circumstances, two determinants that run across our whole life play their roles oftentimes to our liking, oftentimes to our disapproval. These we can reasonably label as losses and gains in our life. An enormous number of them can very easily be put down on a list, evoking a number of reactions like surprise, laughter, anger, sorrow, wistfulness, etc., in the process raising innumerable questions.

Life is not a matter of measurement only; and Tagore also sings that his mind does not give consent to a taking stock of the losses that he has incurred in his life - "Ki pai ni tari hishab milate mono mor nohe raji". Nevertheless, we ordinary human beings cannot exactly do that. Therefore, we may take up a number of losses, eliciting both hilarity and serious contemplation, for observation. For instance, the phenomenon of, if not loss, the disappearance of natural gray hair altogether from where it normally should belong and transforming it all into black as seen on an infant's head. Curiously enough, three generations in a direct line of descent wear black hair these days, which is biologically impossible. The case of differently coloured hair is another story. Here the motive is more of aesthetics than hiding one's age. Since the long flowing hair of women has gradually --- or is it overnight? --- disappeared, Nazrul's outpouring of the heart to his beloved through the song, *Mor priya hobe esho rani debo khonpae tarar phool* becomes an anachronism in these post-modern times. Short, trimmed hair among older women has met with an inverse correlation of long hair among younger men, oftentimes giving rise to perplexity in identifying their gender when seen from behind. Wearing trinkets, particularly earrings, makes the case all the more complicated. However, it is quite a happy situation of give and take, undoubtedly.

There are many other examples of such odd if not abnormal behaviour amongst us. Children these days are being raised in a way hitherto unknown to us. Their efficiency in learning Hindustani as a language

invent something is not an easy job. Innumerable examples can be cited at this point of things lost alone. We fear that in this age of speed, we have lost letter-writing by hand even to our near ones. However inconceivable it may be, letters were once the mainstay of all historical events all over the world. History thus was created, documentation of precious and violent periods of history was made and preserved for human civilisation to study and interpret. An archive of knowledge took shape through correspondence with a human touch. Since machine-produced impersonal kinds of letters have been overtaken by circumstances, one will no longer hear or see the mailman at one's door. Then again, will e-mails find their places in books in future? Will there be books in the printed form, as we see them now, in future? If the answer to the latter question is in the negative, then that would add one more item to the inventory of the museum that future generations will look at awestruck. Since these days almost everything has an 'e' as a prefix, there lies the fear. Concomitantly, reading from pages may as well become obsolete or at least regarded as a wrong habit if not a bad one compared with the preferred mode of reading from the screen. With the complete disappearance of fountain pens and ink, one wonders if this is the reason for naming a literary magazine of repute 'Kali O Kolom' as a requiem to a heritage that is lost.

Another instance of anachronism. A long time ago there was a literary magazine called 'Kali Kolom' in West Bengal. It was meaningful for its time. Since we have not been doing much work that is handwritten, there is every possibility that our own handwriting may look alien to us after a lapse of time. God forbid, if worse comes to worst, we may lose the skill of handwriting on account of having been out of practice. The question is: Would we care even if we lose it? Will it not be completely in sync with our achievement of other losses --- like losing time, principle, morality, sense of humour, aesthetics, sense of history and many more? A great loss and this is a real loss that has dealt a heavy blow to our society. Observe our present-day education. It is most amusing to see winners gaining golden, diamond or platinum A's that put them into a dervish-like spiritual dance.

Can the competent and veteran educationists not examine these examinations and draw up a combination of a specified syllabus and a mechanism for testing knowledge at the same time? Two other gains of gigantic nature are our very special ability of turning every work into business. Concrete examples of this are the sectors of education and medical care. The rate at which



is awesome, something that indicates an immense potential regarding their ability to learn that either intentionally or unintentionally has been shed by educational institutions, to be taken over by the most popular audio-visual medium. Television is their constant teacher and the Internet acts as their private tutor. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to suggest that they will sooner rather than later outgrow the need for their parents and guardians as these days children are actually bringing themselves up. The growth of townships comprising all kinds of vendors around or in front of schools is not so new, a spectacle quite akin to organized clubs but for their infrastructure as they are housed in the streets. Women even have reportedly been seen to have peeled and chopped their vegetables sitting on mats spread there. Just imagine! Women carrying knives along with their lipsticks and combs! Yet they will not go back home, however near that may perhaps be.

The concept of socialization thus breaks all its barriers. The growth of bazaars anywhere and everywhere these days by not sparing patches of grass is a big leap towards economic development, thanks to the schools and their clientele. This is to be taken as one of our 'gains', just as black hair across the broad spectrum of age is, indicative of a population that is young.

Another area where we have not only made a gain but also been inventive in is murdering languages, both Bangla and English. The impurity in using such languages is another glaring example of an attitude of "Who bothers about the correct form?" as long as they are voluble enough about their inventions. The motto here is simple: Keep on uttering something wrong and that is how it becomes accepted as being correct. Thus the latest addition to their patterns of sentence construction is the favourite word 'like', used indiscriminately except for the time when it is needed. It says something about our creativity that as non-native speakers of English we are able to debase the use of English. Again we are not far behind in doing the same to our mother tongue. The peculiar use of the verb form 'bollo, korlo', etc., in their agreement with the pronoun 'ooni' as the subject is most loathsome to hear. It has devastated the Bangla language syntactically. These days no one, be it a teacher or a learner, has any awareness of the condition. Even if they are aware, I am afraid they would not feel any qualms about it. Such is the margin of tolerance. And the lesson? Wrong is beautiful. After all, to

educational institutions and clinics are sprouting up is amazing. The other gain that is relatively recent but has become unstoppable is our newfound love for festivals of book launches. It is a sorry state in which renowned people are made to stand like school students facing the cameras, each holding the same book that also are to face the same visual box.

Last but not least is the cult of cell phones that have turned everybody too mobile. It is the need of the hour, it is the fashion of the hour. With this indispensable object, it seems as if everybody in Bangladesh has got too busy all of a sudden for no apparent reason. It is as if the world stood still till the cell phone was invented. Therefore, mobile phones are a huge gain. It is everywhere with everybody every minute. At long last, at least one electronic gadget has brought about a semblance of socialism, enabling everyone to have an equal share of the wealth. Not only is it linked to a political ideology but it also has a physical and emotional aspects in terms of its being attached to the person the way his own heart and lungs are. The greatest contribution of cell phones has been in transforming our society into a load of fairy tales where almost everyone is dreamy-eyed and has found a partner, however ephemeral that maybe. In every nook and corner of a neighborhood or a street, one spots a quiet talker on the phone. The opposite is also true. There are some mobile phone users who instantly make one feel that they not need to use it. The voice in its scale is loud enough for public consumption, to say nothing of the person at the receiving end. We pray that mobile phones live till eternity in their ubiquity. Unfortunately, we cannot say the same about their users.

On a serious note, the burden of our real losses numb us as we get more and more conditioned to the situation existing around us. Not all gains attained so far are gains for all. They are gains to some only. But that is the order of the day. You either join the bandwagon or become a recluse. Now we can echo what Tagore has said. The line between our losses and gains is so blurred that we fail to tell one from the other. It is unprecedented and a pathetically messy situation. It is an endless story.

Do I sound like a maverick?

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE IS AN EDUCATIONIST, CRITIC AND MUSIC ENTHUSIAST

REFLECTIONS

On a rainy afternoon

AFSANA TAZREEN

"I might be the only person on the face of the earth that knows you're the greatest woman on earth. I might be the only one who appreciates how amazing you are in every single thing that you do and in every single thought that you have, and how you say what you mean, and how you almost always mean something that's all about being straight and good. I think most people miss that about you, and I watch them, wondering how they can watch you bring their food, and clear their tables and never get that they just met the greatest woman alive. And the fact that I get it makes me feel good, about me."

On a nostalgic rainy afternoon, while lazily clicking the buttons on the TV remote control, I bumped into Jack Nicholson saying those lines to Helen Hunt. Being an ardent fan of romantic comedies I have not come across such original lines very often. I made up my mind to catch the movie from the beginning and that night, I did.

Directed by James L. Brooks, this \$50 million-plus romantic comedy, *As Good As It Gets*, absolutely lives up to its title.

The plot revolves around a neurotic, acid-tongued novelist Melvin Udall (Jack Nicholson), who lives alone, working on his 62nd book. Obsessed with ritual, simple tasks like locking the door or washing hands seem like an ordeal to him. In the first few minutes Nicholson successfully portrays Udall as the kind of person we would never want to associate with. Udall takes pride in his ability to

offend. Each time he opens his mouth, something vicious comes out.

One of his neighbours is a talented contemporary artist Simon Nye (Greg Kinnear) whose gay lifestyle Udall vehemently detests. Once when Simon knocked on his door to ask why he had chucked his poodle Verdell down the trash chute, Melvin lashed out at him:

"Never, interrupt me, okay? Not if there's a fire, not even if you hear the sound of a thud from my home and one week later there's a smell coming from there that can only be a decaying human body and you have to hold a hanky to your face because the stench is so thick that you think you're going to faint. Even then, don't come knocking..... Not on this door. Not for ANY reason."

Only Carol Connelly (Helen Hunt), a waitress at his favourite restaurant, seems to tolerate his sarcastic tirades and does not comment when he brings along his own utensils. A single mother struggling to raise her chronically ill son, Connelly misses a day at work only to find the eccentric novelist at her doorstep coaxing her to accompany him to the restaurant so that she can serve him breakfast!

The movie takes on a different turn when Melvin is cornered by Simon's friend Frank (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and forced to take care of the dog when Simon is hospitalised after a brutal mugging. The little creature helps bring out virtues in Udall's character that we never thought he possessed. We see a warmer, kinder Melvin (though at times

the old Melvin rears up his ugly head).

When he sets up unsolicited medical care for Connelly's son, she finds it hard to believe that a misanthrope such as Udall would bestow such generosity on her. In return she writes a lengthy thank-you note for him, which he stubbornly refuses to accept or even read.

Eventually, Melvin is cornered into driving Simon to Baltimore, who in turn corners Connelly into accompanying him. These three sad and lonely New Yorkers discover their fates intertwined. On the surface, they might appear to be poles apart but actually they are more alike than they know.

The movie has some of the most memorable one-liners and a story I think we can all relate to. Nicholson's performance as the incorrigible Melvin is a treat. Priceless performance by the talented supporting cast made the movie memorable.

An honest story about recognisable human beings, *As Good As It Gets* goes out on a limb to say that there are no such things as normal people. None of us are perfect and have that touch of quirkiness in us. Some might even be lunatics like Udall! But we should not lose heart because when we least expect it, someone might just step up and hold our hand to guide us along this incredible journey called life.

"There is a pleasure in being mad which none but madmen know." ~ Dryden

AFSANA TAZREEN IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.