

Of free spirits and fettered souls

Shahid Alam loses himself in the tale of a bohemian

Standard Chartered Bank has generously sponsored The Reading Circle's venture of translating Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Bandhon Hara* into English. The result is *Unfettered*, where eight members of The Reading Circle, a group made up of aficionados of literary works, combine to translate the letters that constitute *Bandhon Hara*. As those familiar with the novella already know, *Bandhon Hara* is made up of stories told through letters. Niaz Zaman, in the preface to the translation, identifies *Bandhon Hara* as probably the first epistolary novel in Bengali, while preferring to categorize Rabindranath Tagore's *Strir Patra*, also composed in epistolary form, as a short story.

Unfettered was inspired by Nazrul's experience as a soldier of the British *raj*, although it is not exactly reflective of his life episodes during that period. There are elements in it that are strongly recognizable as having been taken from occurrences in his life, but much of the rest is left tantalizingly open to speculations of whether those episodes had actually happened to him or not. *Unfettered* is the first of Nazrul's three novels, and although scholars have not thought highly of it (and one can understand why), Niaz Zaman finds it interesting on several counts, including that of historical significance: "It portrays what life was like in the British Indian Army for Indian soldiers, but also for him particularly, a Bengali in an unfamiliar environment."

Unfettered is a story of a strange love triangle, of love felt by the chief protagonist Nurul Huda (Nuru) for two women, Mahbuba and Sophia, and of theirs for him. The twist given here is that Mahbuba and Sophia are close friends, but neither knew that the other loved the same man. Niaz Zaman provides more insight into the narrative: "While narrating an unhappy love story of a man torn between two women, of misunderstandings, of unspoken feelings, the novel also describes Hindu-Muslim attitudes, the growing rise of reading and writing women, and of a few exceptionally brave women who did not get married but devoted their life to teaching."

One of those brave women, Shahoshika Bose, a devotee of Brahmo Samaj, under-

stands the compulsion of Nuru to express his innate free spirit that led to his escapist turn of events. He joins the army, on the face of it, to get out of his impending marriage to Mahbuba, but, as the shrewd Shahoshika observes, Nuru is a natural free spirit who cannot be tamed, and who, even though born in Bengal, has the Bedouin's craze for freedom, the stubbornness of the Arab, and the blood-thirstiness of the Turk flow in his veins." He is a true Bohemian! Nazrul uses Shahoshika (the name itself was particularly appropriately chosen) to deliver some strong messages and profound observations. For instance, "Human beings are far superior to the deities. They have the superhuman quality to endure pain. Human hearts have to endure much more suffering than gods can endure." Or, ponder over these lines: "All religions are true. If someone wants to realize the truth of religion, one has to go beyond man-made rituals.... Similarly to know a person --- to know a person's immortal soul --- one has to see within that person."

Shahoshika was a liberated woman expressing her frank views on society. And so does Rabeya, from within the confines of her social norms and strictures. Note the period when *Unfettered* was composed, and when they voiced their views. It speaks volumes about Nazrul's progressive outlook on life and society. Nazrul's wife, Pramila, belonged to the Brahmo Samaj, and the poet obviously had a soft corner for this particular form of belief and worship. Therefore, it was not outlandish to have him speak these words through Rabeya: "I've never seen such a profound expression of true femininity in any other society or religion or community as I have found among the Brahmo Samaj. All the women of the Brahmo Samaj...have such grace and sweetness...." Rabeya has much more profound observations that hit at the very heart of narrow-mindedness: "Nowadays, many Hindu gentlemen of the modern kind (both young and old) are openhearted and liberal enough to eat and chat with our [Muslim] menfolk, without any fear of losing caste through impure contact, but however

well educated our Hindu sisters may be this obstacle they cannot cross. I do not really know if this is part of their religious beliefs, but I am convinced that no religion can be so narrow-minded or so straitlaced; this practice therefore must be a creation of the society they live in. Such a society must be cleansed of this evil, irrespective of class and gender, of nation or occasion."

Nazrul has some interesting, at times



Bandhon Hara (Unfettered)
Kazi Nazrul Islam
Translation The Reading Circle
Nymphea Publication

caustic or sarcastic or humorous, observations. He has Nuru complaining that others have viewed his joining the army as turning him into a *katkhotta*, as dry and insensitive as the English. Here is a classic case of cultural misunderstanding/insensitivity, but understandable considering the time when the novella was composed. The Anglo-Saxon is by nature rather reserved, different from the usually effervescent Bengali, and the cultural

mores and traditions of the two are quite different from each other. But that is very normal, and absolutely all right. On the topic of "dry", the English have a wicked dry sense of humour! And, in Robiul's letter to Nuru, there are instances of both wry humour and sarcasm, as indeed there are in several other letters. There are vivid and colourful descriptions of weather change and perceptive descriptions of children's behaviour. There is also this bit of truism, as I suspect, for at least a large number of people: "...there are no days as happy as our school days. And the sweet pain of the memory of those happy days manifests itself during one's unhappy existence."

Nazrul has a stricture on the Bengali persona that is both prevalent as well as shameful: "...these are the ones who secretly cannot refrain from revering Rabi Babu (Tagore) a million times --- but in the open, they must criticize him...we cannot tolerate that this familiar individual can become a world-famous personality." And here are some amusing (others might categorize them as politically incorrect in these modern times) observations on women: "Women are the bane of life.... They are constantly squabbling. Because of them, thinkers lose the thread of their thoughts, poets lose their imagination and have to act like well-behaved primates for the sake of peace. A curse upon womenfolk!" And, "...when a woman sets her mind to something, even the strongest man melts like wax...women are fire and men are wax...." I am reminded of a more recent differentiation among the genders, made by a Westerner: that men are from Mars, women from Venus. Oh, well! Furthermore, "...we women have the reputation of being unable to keep secrets...."

However, as Mahbuba's letter to Sophia attests, there are important realizations on women's rights, too. Mahbuba is bitter that "women have been created to suffer, and suffer silently." This situation has come about because rules and regulations have been set down for women by "none other than our menfolk --- our lords and masters." She continues: "I have also come to learn that

heaven lies under the feet of men --- but of course all these books and laws were written by men! And, to think, our religion gave so much honour and respect to women!" This is as strong an indictment of religious distortion and bigotry and male chauvinism as any. Mahbuba takes the point further by indirectly espousing the awakening of women to pursue their rights, and not remaining docile: "Look at women themselves --- steeped in superstition and weird, illogical beliefs." Nazrul does not fail in commenting on certain social habits that do not paint Bengali society in glowing light. The caustic barbs of relatives for kinfolk overstaying their welcome even when in dire straits, and the unkind attitude of uncles' wives towards their nieces staying with them are worth mentioning. As is the touching portrait of the Bengali mother eternally worrying about her offspring, whatever their age, although this is anything but discreditable.

Unfettered has obviously been primarily meant for those readers who are not conversant with the Bengali language. The foreign reader would also likely be confronted with some sort of culture shock. The Westerner, for example, might be bemused by the Bengali penchant for self-pity and self-flagellation. Or be puzzled by some of the expressions. It would be asking too much of a non-Bengali reader, especially one newly introduced to Bengali culture, to be able to get all, or most, of the book's nuances, metaphors, and similes, but, from the standpoint of the story, he/she will understand that, at one level, it is one about a man's love for two women versus love for ones country in peril. But several will get more, much more. They will get a glimpse into the mind of a great poet voicing his progressive thinking through the pages of a novel. For that reason alone, *Unfettered* had to make its appearance alongside *Bandhon Hara*.

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Brilliant stories brought down by a rigid formula

Rajiv Ashrafi is happy and disappointed reading a book

I had never read any Prativa Bose books before *Pathey Holo Deri*. I had heard a lot about her from my mother, which is why I was always interested in Bose's works. This book is a compilation of some of her best short stories, according to the editor Domoyonti Basu Singh, and they are all stories of love and redemption. Despite what the editor thinks about the book, I felt the compilation to be uneven. The stories are all built around the same formula: it works for some, but fails for the others.

The main conceit in these stories is lost love. Almost all the stories start with or feature strong male characters who have somehow become estranged from their wives or lovers. They go through separation for years sometimes decades and then are reunited at the end under various circumstances. As I stated above, this formula is great in some stories, especially the titular short story, though it feels like a trite ritual by the end of the book.

The best are the ones that break this rigid structure. "Amar Bondhu Christina" especially stood out to me; so did "Notun Pata" with its charming take on a coming-of-age story told from a teenage girl's point of view. These narratives offer alternative voices, thus offering a different, fresh take on a similar structure. They are driven by an undercurrent of sadness that forms the cruxes of the stories, though by the end we, as the readers, realize that the characters are satisfied and content with what they have in their lives.

Male characters, meanwhile, have streaks of depression in them. Bose draws them as charming, sophisticated, smart, elegant, and successful men who are taken down by the lack of love in their lives. They have everything money, talent, women yet their existences are empty because they lack the right women by their sides. Women, on the other hand, depend on the men to define them even if they are successful in their own

right. This division between the sexes is jarring and feels positively ancient in this day and age. Taking the age of the stories and Bengali society into account, however, this is understandable.

Another major theme that Bose builds her stories upon is wealth and status. Almost all of her characters are from wealthy families or

Pathey Holo Deri
Prativa Bose

backgrounds, and there is an overwhelming emphasis on money being the source of all happiness. While most other authors focus on love not depending on material possessions or societal status, Bose uses those as tools to bolster her love stories. It is interesting to note the ways in which she uses these as plot devices, especially in the case of "Shonar Shikol", which turns out to be an excellent horror story at the end.

The latter stories of the compilation showcase the lives of Bengalis who live in America. These were, I felt, the most interesting not only because they broke the mold of her regular narrative structure, but also in the ways they displayed interracial love. Bose elegantly walks around 'taboo' topics such as sex in her writing, but she doesn't wholly avoid them either. She was clearly experimenting in these stories, and it works quite well. The various perspectives were pleasant to behold, and the ways in which romance developed was enchanting and fascinating.

An area where I simply cannot complain is the quality of prose. Bose's writing is excellent, flowing smoothly from one word to the other. It's almost poetic at times, putting forward a sense of rhythm through wordplay and juxtaposition. Dialogue flows freely as well, giving the characters personality and a sense of belonging in the world. Moreover, Bose uses very descriptive language to paint a definite

image of the people that inhabit her stories. It is not only physical, but also psychological in the sense that we know what these people love or hate; in fact, you get to know the 'people' so well that you can anticipate their next moves quite easily. This is a feat that I've seen very few short story writers perform, so Bose is among the best. This extends to locations, too, though the effect is not quite as strong.

Bose is an excellent writer who is brought down by the stiff and bulheaded formula she employs in her short stories. Some of them felt like rehashed versions of earlier narratives, and the endings were almost always the same. However, when she strays from the set path, her narratives are wonderful and clearly brilliant. I recommend this book with a heavy heart: I was both satisfied and disappointed. I look forward to reading her other works soon.

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A Bengali among Japanese

Nafees Ahmed reads a work written a century ago

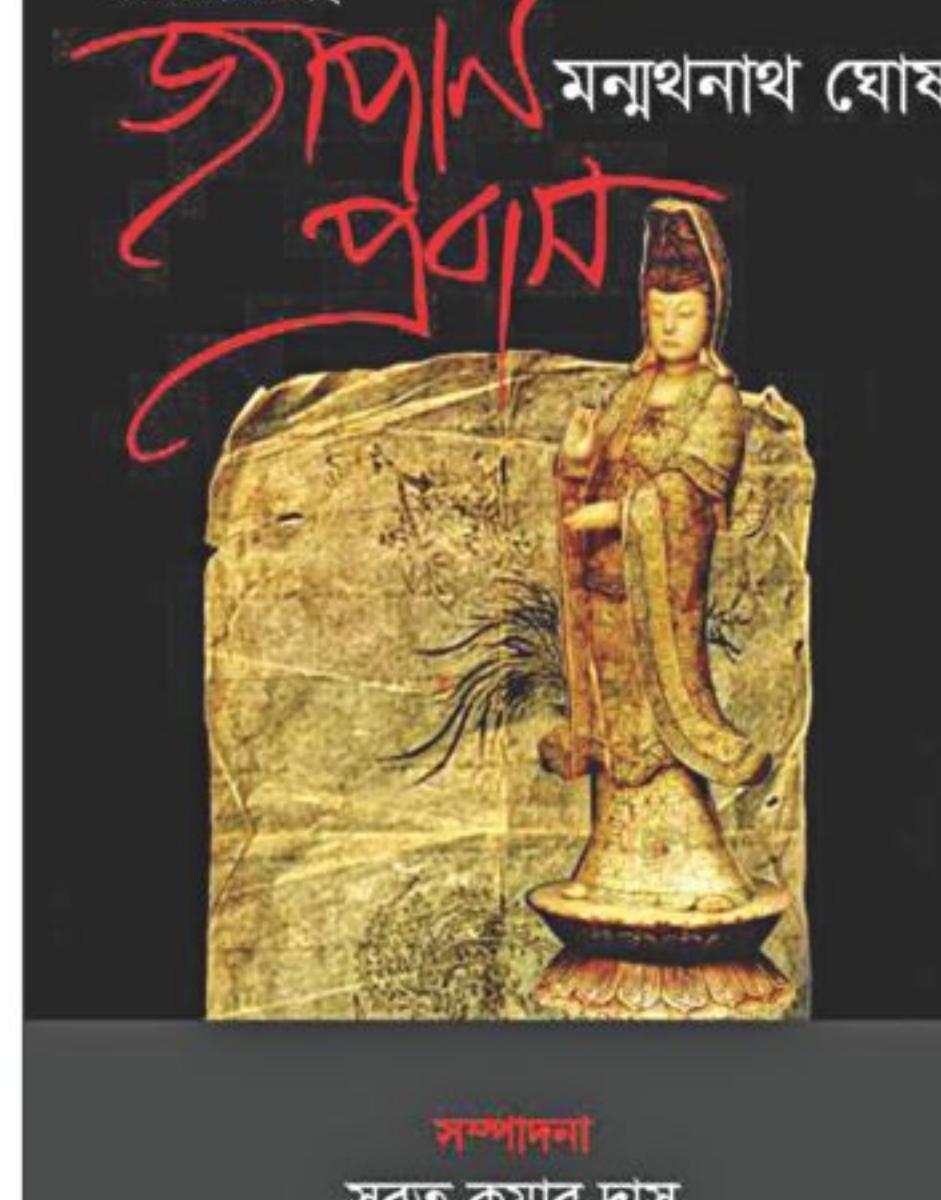
Every sunrise appears with the hope of the day illuminating not only the darkness but also wiping off the tears from paupers' eyes. Japan, known as 'Nippon' or 'Nihon', the most prosperous country in Asia, is called 'The land of the rising sun'. This compliment has really matched every instance of progress in Japan, even till now. This is reflected in every page of the book, 'Japan Probash', written by Manmatha Nath Ghosh more than a century ago. There are two startling themes of this book. It is the first book about Japan written in Bengali, on the one hand. On the other hand, the picturesque description of Japanese society given by the author in this book has not changed much even after such a long time span. This undiscovered resource of our literature has recently been revealed by Subrata Kumar Das, who has edited this book with great care by collecting almost all the information provided by Manmatha Nath Ghosh in his original book.

Ghosh had to go to Japan in 1906 for purposes of education. He recorded aspects of Japanese life, culture and etiquette in detail as he experienced them in his three years' stay in Japan. He did it in a critical manner but used very simple language and subsequently put them together in a book, in other words, the one under review from Kolkata in 1910. One hopes the Dhaka edition of the book, a century later, will be appreciated by readers.

During his stay in Japan he had to come in close contact with many Japanese families even as he pursued his studies. Consequently, he had a chance to understand the life, culture

and psychology of the Japanese people. On the whole he has tried to give the flavour of the tough and hardworking lifestyle of the Japanese on one side of the coin and their ever beaming appearance on the other. They cannot break down even in the worst situation but remain calm and quiet. In this connection, one incident mentioned in the book by Ghosh will not be irrelevant to point out here. One day, while living in Tokyo, Ghosh was returning home from the house of one of his Japanese friends. On his way home he noticed that about 50 houses had been burnt down. And yet the author did not notice any distress in the expressions of the inhabitants of those houses. Instead of crying or screaming, the victims were found to be busy in extinguishing the fire.

The author had to travel different places in Japan, such as Tokyo, Kobe and Osaka in his academic interest. Though the experience that he gathered is noted in the book in a continuous flow within different sections, the whole book can be segregated in three different contents. To display the complete picture of the Japanese the author has revealed the facts of their personal, social and professional lives. The author has described all the parts in such a sensible manner that it cannot be felt monotonous as one reads the book. In a few parts, short Japanese conversations in Bengali make the journey through this book more interesting. While sketching the personal lives



Japan Probash
Manmatha Nath Ghosh
Ed Subrata Kumar Das
Dibyaprokash

of the Japanese the author did not forget to mention their good manners even towards their maid servants. It is true that Japanese people do not waste time in unnecessary gossip, but they are not unsocial. Whatever the social program, marriage ceremony or funeral, they gather together. They do not mourn in an outburst of emotions at the death of their friends, relatives or even any member of the family in the same way that they express their feelings fully on any joyous event. In their philosophy, as death is common incident in life and a person must die once he is born, so exaggeration in mourning is thought to be unnecessary by the Japanese. They have been able to triumph over sorrow and distress by dint of their sportive character.

The author has highlighted the health consciousness of the Japanese by mentioning their diet and appetite. Green tea is one of the most popular drinks that they serve their guests on every occasion either at home or other places. In the period of time Ghosh is speaking of, the Japanese hated to add oil in their food, although nowadays they use oil in their food on quite a few occasions. However, they live on raw fish, vegetables or raw meat even now, besides partaking of burnt or fried fish, meat or vegetables.

We have always known that the Japanese are proactive, skillful and hardworking. The author has focused on these issues by mentioning different incidents or observations. It

can be comprehended only by going through the description of socks manufacturing given by the author.

Two phases have been observed in the character of the Japanese. While living in the boarding in Osaka and with one of Japanese families named Uraiya, Ghosh got an opportunity to learn about the character of the Japanese. Though the author was impressed with the behavior and the integrity of the Japanese, he was nevertheless disappointed with Japanese character to some extent. For instance, he has mentioned their bathing system, which is called 'onsen' or hot spa. In this case, about 20 to 25 persons used to take a bath in one bathtub together by getting undressed. The author considered it offensive compared to the customs of the people of Indian subcontinent.

One of the most important characteristics of this book is the footnotes through which the author explains the particular meaning and usage of some Japanese words. In order to make the reading of this book more useful, Subrata Kumar Das has demonstrated his erudition through his compilation of the information given by Ghosh, which is followed by the incorporation of editorial comments published in different newspapers and magazines on this book in 1910 and 1911 at the end of the work.

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