

Achebe, religion, renaissance and Bangladesh

KAJAL BANDYOPADHYAY

In 2008, the world celebrated 50 years of the publication of a modern classic, *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe. The English Department of Dhaka University took an initiative of celebrating the occasion through a day-long international conference. As part of the program, we were trying to contact Chinua Achebe through a very close friend of his, Professor Don Burness. And the latter finally succeeded in procuring a message of greetings for us from Achebe. With all gratefulness to Prof. Burness, I shall share it today with our readers today.

As the sad news of his passing away reaches us, let me remember how, in an interview, Chinua Achebe recalls his beginnings. There he admits his "beginnings" to have been "clearly influenced by religion." He tells Bradford Morrow, "In fact, my whole artistic career was probably sparked off by ... tension between the Christian religion of my parents, which we followed in our home, and the retreating, older religion of my ancestors, which fortunately for me was still active outside my home. This tension created sparks in my imagination." In a sense, therefore, Achebe's writing career had its inception in conflicts over religion. One can mark how Achebe could, very unusually, find fault with his own religion and find value in the indigenous religion that his grandparents had left behind, "Of course, I did have long periods of doubt and uncertainty, and had a period where I objected strongly to the certitude of Christianity -- I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. When I was little, that didn't mean anything to me, but later on I was able to compare it with the rather careful and far more humble attitude of

my indigenous religion in which because they recognized different gods they also recognized that you might be friendly with this god and fall out with the other one."

So, this is perhaps the perfect Renaissance worldview in Chinua Achebe, of unbiased appreciation of people's various responses to big and small happenings at different places of the planet and at times of history. This is the balance of "normal self-acceptance" that we find in Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo also. Achebe writes almost the same story about his childhood happenings in his famous essay, "Named for Victoria", wherein we find him calling his childhood years "cross-roads of cultures" that was more "clearly" there then than in later times. I do not quote, but, on the basis of it, say that the question with Achebe was of seeing "a canvas steadily and fully" -- which by implication is what historical Renaissance means. In "Named for Victoria," Achebe calls *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) itself "an act of atonement with my past, a ritual return," definitely which also is Renaissance. But what is amazing is how Achebe thinks he got the required outlook, which is Renaissance in character, from his "indigenous religion."

Now, Achebe remembers how there was even in his devoutly Christian father an element of ambivalence that led to the Renaissance spirit through the "artistic element." He remembers, for example, how his father would "be offended if a masquerade came out improperly set up." "Now you wouldn't think that he had any interest in whether a masquerade was properly done up or not. But ... I realised that before he became a Christian, he had been a sensational masquerader himself,



and that the masquerade which he carried was so famous, for its agility and its dance ..." Now, as the Renaissance in Europe brought back Greek and Roman literature and art of excellent quality, so in the case of Achebe's father and in his own, there was the instinctive pull towards "good form, to the artistic element in our tradition." Achebe remembers how "it was that element, particularly the artistic element in our culture that attracted me; a good story, a good dance, a good piece of music, ..." The relativism that Achebe goes by in distancing himself from his own religion, Christianity, and in speaking appreciatively of his grandparents' religion is an ability that Europeans could develop, one

can say, only over centuries. In an interview with Tony Hall, Achebe talks about this, and it appears that conversion to Christianity, instead of resulting in a blind and fanatic allegiance, rather helped him in achieving the required "detachment."

This reminds me of how Karl Marx, being a materialist of a grand and fine scale, could look at religion from a similar distance, and arrive at very deep, true and imaginative conceptions of a "heart of the heartless world" and "sigh of the oppressed creature" about it. In spite of being a Christian, Achebe tells participants in a class discussion in Washington that any claim to certitude like what were made to see by the Christians in Umuofia when they preached "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" was "just blasphemy." Pre-Christian religion, art, literature, and sculpture of Greece or Rome, we know, were similarly rejected and looked down upon with certitude by Christians in Europe. In *Things*, Achebe is "history's eye-witness." To retrieve the human face of Africa, he successfully avoids self-idealisation there. He looks critically in all possible directions, and this is the kind of poise required, in a situation of entanglement, for resolution or synthesis. That is why it appears to me that TFA may turn out to be very helpful or effective in resolving the core crisis now pertaining in Bangladesh where a big section of the people are suffering from an unusual inability to appreciate various worldviews. People in Bangladesh urgently require nation-formation to begin and proceed quickly, and that has to happen through a transformation of the nature of Renaissance. But it is revealing that in Bangladesh critics zealously mark how

Chinua Achebe, in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", lashes out at Conrad, who exposes colonial exploitation but indulges in racialismcolonialism's principal ideological tool. In an ironically similar pattern, and in the characteristic situation of nation-formation not making any headway, intellectuals here, like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, pretend to be exposing and condemning capitalism, but overtly or covertly indulge in communalismcapitalism's principal ideological tool here.

My other significant feeling is that rigorous restrictions coming from emergent forces of history and their going, coming of information, perception, etc. are usual ways of happenings throughout history. These map a common pattern of conflict in culture and civilization. In the case of Christianity, the going of bans became as sensational as the particular word "Renaissance" suggests. One can, for example, mark how Okonkwo, Obeirika and others go attacking and undermining the ways of the neighboring villages. The way Chinua Achebe thus presents rifts and recovery as happening during and after colonialism in Nigeria's Ibo land, it is remarkable more because of how normal it appears. *Things Fall Apart* has become a modern classic the world over because it has presented a familiar scene of self-recovery true on many times and at many places. It is more relevant and significant for countries like Bangladesh where ruptures and bruises in culture and civilization remain undressed in very ominous ways.

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REMEMBRANCE

A fine, quiet intellectual

FAKRUL ALAM

Professor Aali Areefur Rehman, of the Department of English, Rajshahi University, passed away on 21 March 2013. He was sixty three. He had gone to take a M.A. class, but must have suddenly felt very sick, for he left his students telling them that he was going away for a while but would be back.

He fell on his way to the English department office, where faculty members and staff helped him to lie down until he collapsed totally on the lap of one of his dearest students, Professor Abdullah Al Mamun.

At about the same time, I was undergoing surgery in a Dhaka Hospital and it wasn't until late next day while going through my mobile log that I found a message from my dear teacher, Professor Niaz Zaman, telling me: "Just heard about Aali. He was such a fine person and a true scholar. He was a credit to his department, inspiring his students to write theses, I know how close u were and that u will feel his absence".

Professor Zaman was of course right and every word she packed in the sms is importantat least to me. In convalescence now, I thought I would Google and find out how Aali's death has been covered and how he has been remembered in our papers. Sure, he was not a person of "national" significance, whatever that entails, but anyone who has known Rajshahi University in general and its English department in particular over the decades or about the state of English Studies at the tertiary level in Bangladesh over the years, knows that he played a major role in upholding academic standards and providing exemplary service in the cause of scholarship to an institution and a discipline that he loved forever.

To my dismay, I found almost nothing on Aali in our national newspapers and even the web seemed uncharacteristically vacuous to me as I ended my search. Almost the only coverage was in *Bangla News*, 24 com, written no doubt by an ex-student, where his career was outlined very briefly and the condolence meeting arranged for March 24 by the English department of Rajshahi University mentioned. The web has listings of his two major works of scholarship completed decades ago: his 1979 Masters dissertation written as a Commonwealth Scholar at the University of Birmingham's Shakespearean Institute, "A Comparative Studies of Two Elizabethan Epyllions" (if I remember correctly Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*); and his doctoral dissertation written at the University of British Columbia in 1984 titled "A Critical Edition of Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living* (1650)".

As far as I can tell, there are two qualities

that characterize university teaching and mark the stand out teacher. One is common to all teaching though and is applicable to all teachers everywhere. It is a quality most memorably phrased in Geoffrey Chaucer's pithy encomium on his Clerk in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*: "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach". The other, however, is unique to university teaching: he or she is at the frontier of knowledge and must be contributing to it, in every possible way, no matter how specialized or esoteric that knowledge may be, or how limited its usefulness for the general public. This is because in the very act of becoming specialized and contributing to the state of the art (or the sciences) he is amassing knowledge that will help others reach the frontier and inspire the exceptionally talented student to even cross that frontier and go to where no knowledge seeker has gone before.

Aali Areefur Rehman was a standout teacher in both senses of the term. Since I am a perennial member of the Committee of Courses and Studies of Rajshahi University, I have been going to Rajshahi University almost annually since 1986. In all these years I have seen Aali transmitting his enthusiasm for English Studies and scholarship to the best of his students year after year. His eagerness to embrace the latest developments in literary theory and criticism, his ability to foresee the changes that would have to be made to English Studies in Bangladesh by incorporating more language activities in language

departments, his fondness for technologycomputers, the world wide web, concordances et al--his willingness to forge tieswith the local British Council representative for example (when the British Council had not become so entirely bent on generating its income by peddling the English language!) to get books and materials for his departments, his enthusiasm for changes in the curriculum, made him special. It was easy for me to see in every trip I made to Rajshahi that he led the department without wanting to do so, though of course there were the usual ubiquitous stragglers and doubters and partisan shirkers, our supposedly autonomous institutions are so plagued with. Professor Zaman noted rightly in her sms the number of exceptional theses he guided but there were also many issues of the departmental in-house journal, *Praxis*, workshops and conferences that he played a key part in launching year after year.

And as for scholarship, Aali always stayed close to its frontiers. For instance, that hea Bangladeshi educated at Rajshahi Universitythough he was the outstanding student of his generation should go to England to work on English

epyllionssomething even most western scholars would evadeor do a whole dissertation based on complete mastery of textual scholarship as well as seventeenth century Anglican divinity and developments in English prosewere proof of the elevated regions of literary scholarship he had gained access to. As for quality, if the truth be known, Volume I of the 1989 Oxford Clarendon Edition of Taylor's *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying*, where he is credited as the Assistant Editor, is mostly his work, since the putative editor (and Aali's supervisor), Professor Paul

Stanwood, depended by and large on the spade work Aali had done on the texts of *Holy Living* that he had supplied him, both on the textual scholarship and the annotations.

It must be acknowledged, however, that Aali did not stay in these elevated regions of Renaissance scholarship again after he returned to Bangladesh after the six years he spent in England and Canada. Despite a Fulbright year spent at the University of Maryland's College Park, he never completed the Shakespearean editions he kept working at intermittently over the years. Nevertheless, he was working on an edition of *Macbeth* and my last correspondence with himon the 13th of March was on the struggle he was having with the editorial Introduction. To quote from that correspondence: "Its strange...how slow and dragful, to coin a phrase, writing about a Shakespearean play is. Every time I sit down with it I discover new things that I have forgotten about Shakespeare and about this play. I'm writing this mail just to let you know that I'm still enchained and pulling up my stone up the pyramid though I rather think my labor will not come to an end soon".

However, Aali did manage to complete what I think is a solid piece of workalbeit in a minor veinbefore he died. Although unpublished, it is believea valuable contribution to local/family history as well as an excellent testimony to his scholarship, sense of history, and control over English prose. Titled "Zamindars: The Khan Chowdhurys of Natore", it is a thoroughly researched, quite objective and yet deeply felt account of his paternal line. To quote from the work: it was an " attempt to keep ancestral tales alive, but with this difference that it aims to be more than a mere catalogue of events, and intends to clear up confusion rather than cause it. The family that I write about here, and especially the members of it whom I focus upon most, was only moderately wealthy and perhaps a little less than moderately influential, though many of its representatives were well known in the region where they had their principal residence. Furthermore,

their prominence, such as it was, came about during British times; their previous history is almost totally unknown. I write about them because they are bound to me by the closest of ties, all of them being my matrilineal ancestors, but also because I feel their story forms an archive that needs to be preserved and a narrative that deserves to be told" The same historical imagination and the impulse to discover his roots led him to what I believe is another major contribution to scholarship that can be attributed to him: a fine and succinct history of the publishing activity that went on in Allahabad before partition, where his father had been a leading publisher.

One reason why so little of Aali's work has remained unpublished or has been printed in obscure journals is his self-effacing personality. But he has also published inadequately because of his fastidiousness. I have a feeling that he has written a lot more than he has published but was never completely satisfied with what he did because what had to be printed had to be of the best quality. This fastidiousness surely extended also to his fiction for on the basis of "Waiting", a vivid narrative of a husband's travails as he waits in a mofussil hospital for his wife to deliver her child and "Grandmother's Wardrobe", a wonderful story published in *From the Delta: English Fiction from Bangladesh*, edited by Professor Zaman., he has clearly shown that he was a first-rate (and not a novice) writer of fiction as well as a critic and a scholar.

The task of his colleagues, students and friends must then be not only to remember him but to collect his works published at home and abroad and still unpublished and then publish them with the kind of editing he would have approved of. He has left behind in Rajshahi hundreds of grieving students and a loving family he doted on. Indeed, he was a loving husband and a father, a dutiful son, a caring friend and relative and courteous, conscientious and sensitive in his dealings with everyone. He loved Rajshahi and its environs and was an expert on the history of the division. I know for a fact that he refused the offer of an American citizenship for his love of Rajshahi. Surely, not only the university but parts of the city must be missing him.

I, who had the privilege of not only knowing closely him for over three decades will miss him forever; this obituary is only my attempt to tell the readers of these pages that the nation has lost one of its finest but quietest intellectuals.

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Of exotica and allure

Mahbub Husain Khan

We all remember the luminescent lines of Shubhash Mukhopadhyaya, who wrote about the first day of Falgun:

"Flowers may bloom or not
Spring is here today"

Falgun is spring, February is Bashonto. And the season of festivals is upon us. And I received the book of poems written by Rummana Chowdhury during the first week of Falgun. I was reminded of the lines by Syed Badrul Ahsan as I read Rummana Chowdhury's book: 'Poetry is an ageless experience. There is about it a timelessness you cannot ignore'. I have read some of the previous books of poetry and other works by Rummana Chowdhury, who is academically junior to me at Dhaka University, but was a celebrated student and sports-woman and is now a citizen of Canada.



Rummana Chowdhury

There are twenty seven poems in this collection in Bangla and each of these poems is translated into English on the converse page. There are specific statements about concrete emotions Rummana rarely generalizes or resorts to abstractions and yet they echo well beyond their given points of utterance. At their most intense, these twenty-seven poems convey all the exotica of the Bangla language and life and the allure of the English translation of the poems. To praise poets for their subjects is misguided. Many of them like Rummana have little choice in the matter. What poets do with their inheritances means everything. And Rummana's language has evolved from the imitations of Bangla poets into an instrument of marvelous flexibility: capable of grand, sweeping imagery but also of harsh interruptions and interjections. The combined effect is a verbal radiance of scenes illuminated by "the eternal sunshine". The myriad aspects of nature, exile, belonging are explored in ways both witty and moving. The voices of the outsider and the voices of those who believe they belong are juxtaposed in impassioned dialogues that continue to charm and mesmerize. Rummana's personal history is a lyrical ode to the poeta travelling adventurer, rebel and a writer.

MAHBUB HUSAIN KHAN IS A NOVELIST AND CRITIC AND HAS BEEN A CIVIL SERVANT