

ROMANCE

Epistolary love of great men

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

There is always a universal query that keeps disturbing us. What is the knot that binds love so strong? Is it beauty, brains, or common interests and beliefs? For me it is a combination of all these. It was quite intriguing going through the love letters of great men the other day. I realized there was more to love than just courting. There was a very deep animation running through their beings, a 'Platonic' sort of magnetic attraction that put them on the same mental plane and I thought I would love to share it with you too. So for all the Valentines out there, Spring calls for a celebration of love and memories of its past and present. As every year, I love to sing Tagore's 'boshonte phool gathlo amar joyer mala/boilo praney dokhin haowa,' more because it comes right after another favourite 'Orey bhai Fagun legechhe bon-e-bon-e, in 'mone mone' too!

Today in an attempt to embellish my writing with a collection of love letters of great men I find that most of my poems are in a similar emotional and social milieu and relate to the present generation. Although love has through the ages travelled effortlessly and has kept men engaged since Creation, it is sometimes trivial, yet mundane and definitely soul touching. Hopefully, the theme of this article might be eye-catching and readable. This is the distinctive feature of a writer who is trying to adopt a masterful way of reaching out to people who are in love.

Let us begin by going through John Keats' (1795-1821) love letter to Fanny Brawne, a Hampstead neighbour, to whom he was engaged.

To Fanny Brawn (July 1819):

*My sweet girl,
I am always astounded that any absent one should have the luxurious power over my senses. I must confess that I love you, the more in that I believe, you have liked me for my own sake, and for nothing else.*

Ever yours, my love!

To Fanny Brawn (1820):

*Sweetest Fanny,
You fear sometimes I do not love you so much as you wish! My dear girl, I love you ever and ever without reserve. The more I have known, the more I have loved. Do I not see a heart naturally furnished with wings imprison itself with me? My mind has been the most discontented and restless one that ever was put into a body too small for it! I never felt my mind repose upon anything with complete and undistracted enjoyment upon no person but you... Past experience connected with the fact of my long separation from you gives me agonies which are scarcely to be talked of. The air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy. Ask yourself how many unhappy hours Keats has caused you in loneliness. For myself I have been a martyr the whole time!*

Yours forever,
J.Keats.
Victor Hugo (1812 -1885):

Adele Fouchur was a childhood friend with whom Hugo fell in love and later married.

To Adele Fouchur (January 1820)
A few words from you, my beloved Adele, have again changed the state of my mind. Then it is true that you love me, Adele? Tell me, can I trust in this enchanting idea? Don't you think that I shall end by becoming insane with joy if ever I can pass the whole of my life at your feet, sure of making you as happy as I shall be myself, sure of being adored by you as you are adored by me? Adele, my beloved angel, would that I could prostrate myself before you as before a divinity.

Let us go through a love letter from another giant, William Congreve (1670-1729), celebrated dramatist who wrote 'The Way of The World'.

To Mrs. Arabella Hunt
*Dear Madam
...Not believe that I love you? You cannot pretend to be so incredulous. If you don't*



Robert Browning

believe in my tongue, consult my eyes, consult your own. You will find by yours that they have charms, by mine that I have a heart which feels them. But love, almighty love seems in a moment to have removed me to a prodigious dislike from every object but you alone. In the midst of crowds I remain in solitude. Nothing but you can lay hold of my mind, and that can lay hold of nothing but you. Unlone objects are all around me accepting thee, the charms of all the world appear to be translated to thee.

Richard Steele (1672 -1729), a journalist, writer, and politician, he called his wife Mary, 'Dear Pru'. He also wrote more than four hundred letters both before and during their marriage.

Madam,
With what language shall I address my lovely fair, to acquaint her with the sentiments of a heart she delights to torture?

Alexander Pope (1688 -1744) wrote to Martha Blount:
Most divine, ...that heart must have abundance of flames which at once are warmed by wine and you...

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 -1821), to his wife Josephine:
...I detest thee, thou art horrid, thou dost not write with love for thy husband, thou



Victor Hugo

knowest the pleasure that thy letters afford him and thou doth not write a single line of even haphazard scribble.

Lord Byron (1788 -1824):
'Byronic' has become shorthand for a particular type of romantic hero pale, dark haired, hollow-cheeked, cruel, reckless, and irresistible to many women. One of the most notorious entanglements of Byron's life was with the married Lady Caroline Lamb.

... You know I would with pleasure give up all here and beyond the great, for you. I care not who knows what use is made of it, it is to you and to you only yourself, I was and am yours freely and entirely to obey, to honour, love, and fly with you.

To the Countess Guiccioli, (25 August 1819):

But I more than love you and cannot cease to love you. Think of me sometimes, when the Alps and the oceans divide us, but they never will, unless you wish it.

Robert Browning (1812 - 1889)
To Elizabeth Barrett, on the morning of their wedding day (12 September 1846).

... My dearest own Ba! You have given me the highest, complete proof of love that ever one human being gave another. I am all gratitude and all pride, that any life has so crowded but by you.

Addresses to your paramour have not changed much over the years. The thoughts are similar more or less, even at times the content of the messages is almost identical, for men are great when they are in love!

As Leona Lewis sings in 'Keep Bleeding':
*Closed off from love! I did not need the pain
Once or twice was enough and it was all in vain*

Time starts to pass / before you know if you are frozen

... Yet I know that the goal is to keep me from falling

*But nothing is greater than the rush that comes with your embrace
And in this world of loneliness I see your face.*

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA IS A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND POET.

PORTRAIT

The genius of Abdul Karim

NASHID KAMAL

His name was Abdul Karim but he had a very interesting nickname, 'Bhatka'. I was told to address him as 'Bhatka Dadu'. The very first thing I remember was his friendship with my grandmother Begum Abbasuddin. He worked just within walking distance from our house in Purana Paltan, Dhaka. He would arrive at our house around 11 am and I would hear him calling my grandmother, "Bhabi, Bhabi!". From her bedroom upstairs, Dadu would rush downstairs and would respond to him, "Ke Bhatka?"

This gentleman was my grandfather Abbasuddin Ahmed's younger brother. He was about the same age as my Dadi. It was very interesting to see them together. He was full of laughter, jokes and leg-pulling at other people's expense. His first job was to sit in a comfortable position and then send the domestic staff to get some betel leaf (paan). Then he would look at me and say, "Bhabi, wonder why this London grandchild of yours has a dark complexion? Wonder why the hole of her nose is like a fish sliced in half?" They would both roll in laughter and I had no idea whether this was good or bad and why they were laughing.

He used the colloquial language of Cooch Bihar. My nightmare became more prominent when my younger sister Naeela was born. I was very anxious to babysit her and carried her in my arms with great enthusiasm. Bhatka Dada quipped, "Okay, now Naeela's complexion is really glittering, it is in sharp contrast with Nashid's." I was more than compared to my sister. Glad I didn't understand his joke or his sarcasm, otherwise I would not have liked him. I loved him intensely, mainly because I found my Dadi, Chacha and aunt Ferdousi were very close to him. They loved him dearly. He was their father-figure in the absence of their beloved father Abbasuddin Ahmed whom they had lost recently (1959).

Before partition, Abbasuddin Ahmed lived in India. His family lived in Cooch Bihar under the guardianship of his younger brother Abdul Karim, while Abbasuddin Ahmed lived alone in Calcutta, pursuing his musical career which was full of thorns and hardly a bed of roses.

On the one hand, poet Abdul Karim was a multi-faceted genius; on the other, he was also their guardian. Abbasuddin Ahmed's father ostracized him for becoming a singer, pushing Abbasuddin into a struggling life. He, however, sent some money for his grandchildren. Abdul Karim kept the hazy accounts, and was sometimes caught eating out in restaurants. However, his love for his niece and nephews knew no bounds. Every year he wrote children's plays which were enacted by Mustafa Kamal, Mustafa Zaman and Ferdousi Begum along with a host of other cousins who lived nearby.

Many years later I found the entire manuscript of one such children's drama, titled 'Eider Dine', in one of the drawers maintained by my father. Abdul Karim's handwriting was just like pearls. He coached his wards on how to pronounce words, dialogues, acting, singing and also aided them in building the stage inside the Cooch Bihar house.

No wonder all my other uncles and aunts (cousins of my father) were all so versatile singers, mimickers, drama artists, reciters, singers even though they are not so by profession.

Abdul Karim's main legacy, however, is his unique and unparalleled bhawaiya songs. Once the packet of betel leaves arrived, he would lift his legs up on the sofa, munch his paan and his pen would start shooting out magic words. He wrote the songs made famous by my aunt Ferdousi Rahman, 'Aji bahahal koriya' and those like 'Nimer dotara tui more'. When Ferdousi was home, she too would join the session. She would share her ideas on what kind of song she wanted, or a change in tune, and Abdul Karim would write accordingly. He was almost instantaneous, like pressing the button for coffee in a vending machine. I found them laughing, joking, imitating village sounds. Little did I know that those sounds would stay with me for the rest of my life.

Every holiday I would coax my grandmother to take me to visit Bhatka Dadu. It was quite a journey from Purana Paltan to Patla Khan Lane near old Dhaka (Bahadur Shah Park). I felt greatly attached to this house, because I heard that my grandfather also lived there earlier (along with his children). By this time Abdul Karim was chronically ill. He would send us messages of being critical and we would rush to visit him. There he sat in the bedroom upstairs, riddled with illness, yet so vivacious and full of life. I would not want to return home. I sat glued to him as he would ask his wife to make pulao for me which I loved. When evening came, along with his four daughters, we sat in the balcony outside his bedroom. In the slight glow of the receding sun, he would ask each of us to sing a song. Noting my interest in music, he spoke to my mom, who was a strict disciplinarian, and requested her to employ a musical guru. Everyone thought that I stayed back to enjoy the round balls of tamarind and sugar which he kept under his pillow (for me). Actually, it was his colourful personality, the mimicking, acting, story-telling, song writing that had me spellbound.

He spoke a lot about my grandfather Abbasuddin Ahmed and the time when he lived in Calcutta. My grandmother missed her husband and used to cry her heart out to her brother-in-law. Some of that longing, pining, had been captured by the bhawaiya songs written by Abdul Karim. One of the most famous ones is 'O more kala re kala', sung by Abbasuddin Ahmed. Many years later, in 1999, I was able to visit the abode of my grandfather in Cooch Bihar. I was accompanying my father who showed me the wide expanse of land that extended from their house and ended in infinity. The portion was called 'Shadur Dola'. My grandmother sat there yearning for her husband and during the monsoon season, the tears she shed and those that filled up the 'Shadur Dola', became one of the passionate songs that bore witness to his creativity.

On 13 March 1971, we received a call from his neighbour that Bhatka Dadu alias Abdul Karim was critically ill. He was an asthma patient and my father rushed to look for an oxygen cylinder. During those dark nights of curfew and crackdown, nothing was available. He said goodbye to this world. We children did not have a last glimpse of this delightful soul, who not only brought so much joy to me, but had an immense ability to connect. I think he knew who I was in a way that no one else will know. (www.clickitfaq)

DR. NASHID KAMAL IS AN ACADEMIC, POET AND REPUTED NAZRUL EXPONENT.

MEMORIES

Wherever you are...

SUNANDA KABIR

It was a summer evening. Mrs. Imam our provost told me to meet Mr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurata, provost of Jagannath Hall. Quite a fresher from Comilla Victoria College, I was a bit shaky. I went to his place and was warmly accepted. Mr. Munier Choudhury was there. I recognized Jyotirmoy Babu and another tall, handsome, stylist personality was there, who was quite unknown to me. Jyotirmoy Babu gave me a piece of dialogue. It was the selection of artists for the annual play of Jagannath Hall. I went on with that. A silence for a while. Mr. Guhathakurata said, 'Wonderful! 'Very good!', appreciated Mr. Choudhury. But the other one did not utter a single word. Suddenly he asked me, 'What's your name?'

I replied.
Again he enquired, 'Coming from?'
'Comilla', I said.
'By any chance, are you related to Professor Sudhir Sen?'
'Yes, I am. My dad!'
He took a long breath and concluded:
'That's why!'

I got the highest admiration in an exotic way and that was Khan Sarwar Murshid. His mannerisms, his wonderful delivery of speech combined with a romantic voice were rare qualities even among highly educated class. I was not a student of the English department. Nevertheless, I always used to respect him as my teacher. Being a rare symbol of knowledge, we could learn a lot from close quarters. Almost everyone, preoccupied with his intelligence and wit, never felt bored while conversing with him. Mr. Murshid's proficiency in both English and Bengali never made a stereotype of his personality.

When I got married, he came with Noorjahan apa, his wife, and blessed me. We won't forget his unfailing support at that crucial time. Soft spoken but firm, Murshid made it clear to my brother-in-law that we had done the right thing. Quite open-minded and very liberal, Sarwar Murshid used to encourage every good and honest deed. His graciousness, his charisma, his sophistication and magnanimity put him in a class of his own.

I used to talk to him even when he was ill. He loved to hear me recite. I cracked jokes and the professor pampered this immature fool a lot. Lastly, I requested him to write on my father. He asked me to go to him and take down his dictation. I could not make time and now I repent as I could not.

Note: Dr. Sarwar Murshid's nickname was Shahjahan and he had his schooling in Brahmanbaria. Once the annual examination of the school was going on. Class Eight was having its history exam and a question was related to the emperor Shahjahan in relation to his father (Emperor Jahangir). Unfortunately, a boy forgot Shahjahan's father's name and, in utter helplessness, he could only ask the peon, who was already in the exam hall to serve water, to help with the answer. The peon promptly answered, 'Why, it's Ammad Advocate!' He was referring to the boy Shahjahan's father!

Morshed Sir, wherever you are, rest in peace! I must weep and they are real tears!

SUNANDA KABIR IS A POET AND SHORT STORY WRITER

SHORT STORY

A day in the life of Bhushon

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ

There was no human settlement. So many days he had traveled this route alone, but today he got scared. He would not be able to return from the market before the nightfall. Without Haridas, how would he return? Bhushon had not come across such a problem ever before.

Rowing up to the middle of the market, he tied up the raft against a stump behind Ratan's grocery and bought spinach, gourd and green bananas. Carrying them on his head, he reached the vegetable section of the market through a narrow slant. He twisted his leg a few times while climbing up the steep slope, encircled by a thorny bush. It was quite a struggle to proceed through. Bhushon started panting after making his way through to the entry point of the vegetable compound. He was already late. Meanwhile, the village market was brimming with buyers and sellers. The bustling market witnessed a capacity crowd as if all the able-bodied men from the neighboring area had thronged the market.

Bhushon wondered why the multitude of people was way too much today. The din and bustle caused a deep buzzing sound in his ears. Suddenly, he could see Haridas gossiping and laughing loudly with some people in front of a teashop. Bhushon started trembling in anger: his brownish eyes lit up in fury, and the shape of his mouth turned square. Certainly, like a tiger, Bhushon would have pounced on Haridas had he not carried the load of vegetables on his head. Moreover, his hands were engaged too. For some moments, he did not understand what he should do. Eventually, he took the load off his head in a hurry, and gritting his teeth, an enraged Bhushon foolishly chased Haridas. Standing on the stairs of the shop, he roared: "Come here. *Haramzada*, I'll sort things out today. It has to be either me or you, son of a bitch."

Haridas' face turned pale as Bhushon's yelp sent down a shudder down his spine. Haridas was descending the stairs tremulously. In close proximity, Bhushon was waiting; ready for action; it was as if he would behead him as soon as Haridas would come within his reach. Right at that moment, a resonance of a rattle floated in from across the canal. His experiences said that this was the sound from a motor launch; this sort of sound was common when a motor launch would anchor at the moorage. But never did any motor launch come to or pass through this canal!

By that time he found Haridas quite close to him, but Bhushon stood there stupefied. Right

at that moment a bomb exploded shaking the entire market. He could see the whole tamarind tree trembling; some crows were resting on its branches; they flew off and began circling round the place crying harsh. He could hear the sound once again: firstly, it was a huge noise, almost ear-splitting, and then a sharp metallic echo emanating from a machine, made of iron. As the sound came through, Bhushon's loin-cloth got tangled with his legs, and it was as if his legs would get stuck in ground. In front was Haridas standing confounded. The clamor died down, and an uneasy calm gripped the market. The intensity of silence was indescribable: the growing dread and panic together made the silence even more sharp and its weight unbearable.

Intermittently, the terrible sound continued: initially, the sound was booming *Guum*, followed by a metallic echo, *chaai*. Thereafter, Bhushon could not hear anything like the noise of a motor-launch. He could only hear a new sound, *frrr*. It was like the sound of a small bird flapping its wings while flying speedily between the isles of cultivable lands. Soon after he had heard this sound, he could listen to a wave of loud wail screaming out of terror from one corner of the village market. Tracking the panic-stricken sight of Haridas, Bhushon looked back at the canal only to find a man coming towards them through the vertical incline. He was wearing brownish shirt and trousers; the forehead-covering cap was placed slanted on his head. Bhushon stared at the eyes of the fair, tall and mountain-like stout man. Immediately, he remembered the stern but sharp sight of the eyes of the Sundarban tiger that he saw during his youth. He could not figure out what the man was shouting for at the top of his voice. However, what he could retrieve were some words: liars, cheats, Satans, infidels, and he kept gazing at the short-sized black gun, made of iron. Instantaneously, he could see another person beside him; it was as if the first person became two in a flash. With their boots striking the ground, one after another was coming through the narrow undulating alley. Reaching the surface level, they spread themselves along the bank of the river, right away. Now Bhushon could clearly hear the jangle of bullets:
khat...khat...khat...khat. It left a harsh deafening sound on his ears. Taken aback Haridas leapt some steps back. Listlessly, Bhushon kept staring at the teary-eyed April sky. The sun was still shining brightly on the treetops. Again came the rattling sound:
khat...khat...khat...khat, and Bhushon could see people falling on the ground like the

falling a tree after being cut at its base. Soon after, he could see blood gushing out of the heads, legs, shoulders, chests or stomachs of some people. He could only see the people falling like a pack of cards, but he could not hear the flowing sound of blood warbling through.

Transfixed Bhushon did not know what to do; so was the situation with the rest of the people of the village market. Stone-still they stood watching the drama unfolding. Suddenly, the imposing deadly silence came to an end, and then they ran amuck screaming and seeking shelter and safety. Many stumbled and fell on the ground while running for life. For a moment or two, some people looked back at the canal and then squatted on the ground clasping their stomachs, and blood started flowing relentlessly. The way the blood ran through the white smooth brick like path, it seemed to have left no traces excepting some foamy whiteness formed here and there. Somewhere, though, the grasses were wet, with discernable spots of blood on some tall leaves that keep dangling in air.

Khat...khat...khat...khat. The sound continued. Bodies after bodies kept piling up like sacks someone violently moved his hands and legs, while the eyelid of another one quivered before coming to a standstill. In opaque eyes, either perturbed or afflicted people kept gazing at the April sky. The wind became heavy with people uttering the name of God in chorus many people chanted the name of God, and during the period of intervening silence, people lay prostrate on the ground. Someone seemed to be lying on the ground, slightly slanted, with his legs folded and vegetables-filled bag slung across his chest. Defying the bullet-ridden chest, an eighty-year old woman was putting in her last-ditch effort to tighten her embroidered cloth bag around her waist.

Meanwhile, pulling Haridas' hand, Bhushon reached behind the tamarind tree for cover. Where else could he go? He kept hearing the clatter of the gun shots; however, nobody could be spotted as far as his eyes could see. Uncountable number of people were falling flat on the ground; some were still screaming and uttering the name of God while some others were demanding water and throwing hands and legs in utter helplessness. The small huts of the market were collapsing on the ground. Bullets were whizzing past in different directions. Bhushon saw a young woman, aged around 24-25, tying her black baby to her lap

TRANSLATION: HAROONZAMAN, WHO TEACHES ENGLISH AT INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH (IUB).