

LETTER FROM BOSTON

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Marcel Proust, the great French novelist, critic, and essayist, well-known for his monumental novel *Remembrance of Things Past* which was characterized by Somerset Maugham as the “greatest fiction to date”, spent more than ten years in his house (mostly confined to bed though because of his severe asthmatic lungs) while he worked on his literary undertakings. Fortunately for Proust, he was able to stay in this comfortable, and for him stimulating setting, since he was independently wealthy thanks to his father, a doctor, and his mother, who came from a rich Jewish family. As fellow writers and my readers are equally aware, the task of writing is a serious endeavor and requires not only commitment and all the other ingredients that authors from Homer to modern-day Orhan Pamuk have identified, but also a nice and quiet environment to concentrate, reflect, and get one's ideas to the fore. As for myself, I cannot afford the luxury of spending much time in my home since my work and travels keep me away, although I will admit that my latest bout of creative energy started in this house one lazy morning as I was sitting by my kitchen window looking out at the vast expanse of open fields,

dales, and the wooded skyline beyond. I felt so transfixed by this natural beauty unfolding right in front of my house and the peace and tranquility inside with my beloved, I understood why poets and writers often like to stay where they are, in loco, or to put it in the words of the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, who waxed eloquent about his own neighborhood and said that he wanted to spend his life among “the leafy chestnut trees of Paris”.

Turning now to someone closer to home, we can divine that Tagore's writings have been informed, influenced, and shaped by his settings. When I read or sing his songs, “Ashar shondha ghooneyey elo” or “amar raat pohalo sharodo pratey”, I can close my eyes and see him sitting in his porch with his notebook in his Jorashanko house, on a rocking chair, or on the house boat on the river Padma with the rain pouring over his tall slightly bent figure as he plays with the tunes or lyrics of a song. Even his letters to his accomplices say as much. During his trip to Japan in the 1930s on Tosa Maru, he writes to Abanindranath, “Last night I couldn't sleep ... the weather turned hostile and the ship was tossing and turning in the ocean. Finally I gathered my nerves and wrote down the song”, “Bhubon jora ashon khani”. Or from his estate in

Shelaidah, where he penned his heart-rending song, “Jodi hay jeebon purno holo tobo okripun korey”, and says “Baishakher sheerno nadi bhora sroter daan naa paye jodi”, in the third quatrain of the song.

I can now understand better the meaning and provenance of various labels, some of which appear to be at times mysterious, that Tagore acquired during his life and after, particularly through the influence of his frequent travels. While I had somewhat known about his travels, some of which were long and some short, and the well-justified sobriquet “peripatetic litterateur”, now I understand why Tagore changed his venue often, and how that helped him avoid the “writer's block”.

Needless to say, both the natural environment and the muse leave a big influence on a writer and her work. The setting sun, seen from my front yard or the deck at the back of my house, never fails to get me feeling sometimes nostalgic, sometimes romantic, or just ecstatic. I try to capture those sentiments either in real-time or usually later when my creative juices start flowing. I know that since I am not a natural-born writer it is nature or mood that usually inform my prose, rather than the other way around. Most often when I sit down to write I am at a public library sur-

rounded by computers or in my wife's study which is decked with her work in progress. My typical session at the keyboard is a concurrent interplay of words trying to capture a lost moment and past scenes unrolling in my mind's projection screen. However, like all aspiring writers, and inspired by Tagore and his ability to write and be imbued by his constantly changing locales, I have myself often changed my writing place. Tagore has on occasions written from his houseboat anchored on the river bank or coursing down the rivers. The rivers and waterways are not very far from where I live; the Charles, Taunton, Neponset, or the Mystic rivers are only a few minutes away, and even closer are the lakes and ponds that are spread all over the region. Nonetheless, I have never attempted to sit on a boat and write, though I am well aware of the soothing and hallucinatory effects of water on a writer's right brain. One possible excuse for that is while most of these locations are within driving distance, none are within walking distance from my home. Therefore, my joy was boundless, as one might imagine, when I discovered the other day a little stream and small bog right in front of my house in the Nature Conservancy land created out of an abandoned dairy

farm. The view took me back to the little pond in Cezanne's “The Large Bathers”. I was determined to find a small raft or boat to launch and to take advantage of this bucolic setting. I was convinced that as I sat on my boat or raft, or enjoyed nature and saw the sun go down across the trees, I would be able to not only describe it, but would see ideas sprouting in my mind in the manner that nature walks in the rural areas of Dinajpur or Mymensingh or on boat rides in the Sundarbans.

I finally bought a little boat (actually a kayak, as I was later told), and decided to carry it to the recently discovered pond. To witness the launching of this vessel and to make the event more romantic, I invited my muse, who accepted even though she was not too excited about the project, but consented to keep me company. I was thrilled by the prospect of sitting with her on the boat, facing each other, as we did when we first met many years ago on a little dinghy on Dhanmondi Lake, taking in the Monet-like picture-perfect setting, the flowing water and soft tinges, the undulating land, and the trees beyond as the gentle breeze whispered through the tall grass and brush. The launch went perfectly, and only after I made myself comfortable on the small narrow boat and invited her to join me, did she

finally reveal her true intentions. She could not hide it behind her smile when she said, “Well, this journey is one you have to undertake by yourself. I will be watching you from the shore!” I will not deny that I was half-anticipating this eventuality, since her reservations about going on a boat with me were barely concealed during the few weeks that I spent hatching the plan with her and went through two rounds of searching and shopping for the perfect boat. But now, when it was time for her to step into the boat, she wanted to wait out, and recited from Tagore's Sonar Tori, “thhai nai, thhai nai, chhoto e tori”, echoing the memorable line that Tagore heard as he tried to get on board the “golden boat”. Except that my partner in all crimes used the same lines only to keep herself out of my boat! I did not know what to do then. I just looked at her, and wondered what had happened to the girl who stepped on the boat with me on Dhanmondi Lake in the fading lights without any hesitation not too long ago? The answer might come to me when I find the time to start my own version of *Remembrance of Things in My Past* (apologies to Proust for mangling the title) and start reflecting on life's deeper meanings.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON.

Nadera Begum

A life lived in quiet courage

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There was nothing of pretence in Nadera Begum. And pretension was an idea abhorrent to her as she coursed through life in all its varied dimensions. Her reading sustained her; and her teaching was something more than a vocation for her. She was unlike any other teacher in the department of English at Dhaka University in that she brought into her pedagogy, if one might use that term, a good deal of the informal. That essentially meant developing a remarkable degree of rapport with her students. She was forever breezing through the corridors of the department, an incessant sign of the activism that once defined her life. Her classroom lectures were brisk, noted for the constant flow of ideas which appeared from somewhere deep within her. Yes, you could say Nadera Begum was unconventional in the way she handled life in academia.

It was the unconventional which, back in what we now regard as the defining moment that was 1948, Nadera Begum called forth in her. She was young, came of a large family of siblings attuned to matters literary as well as political and cultural. There was Kabir Chowdhury. There was Munier Chowdhury, whom Pakistan and its quislings would murder in the War of Liberation. And, of course, there was the sister who would someday be known in



the Bengali world of aesthetics as Ferdousi Majumdar. There were the others as well. But where Nadera Begum diverged from her siblings was not in the way she observed politics and culture, not in the way the family shared beliefs and values, but in the idea that politics sometimes needed a radical touch. Given that the state of Pakistan was increasingly exposing itself to charges of communalism and left-over feudalism, given too that the state was determined to ride

roughshod over Bengali aspirations, protest was in order. Nadera Begum was part of that protest.

Nadera Begum was a young Bengali student, which is why it was only natural that hers would be a voice of resistance linking up with every other voice of resistance in Pakistan's eastern province. There was logic in that protest, for it was the Bengali language that was coming under assault. If men of the stature of Dharendra Nath Dutta boldly raised the question of the status of the Bangla language in a country founded on communal politics, it was the young, like Nadera Begum, who showed promise of carrying the torch into the future. And it was a job Nadera Begum, young and vivacious and fired by conviction, did very well. In 1948, it was heresy to challenge the government. It was apostasy to question the workings of the state. But there were the young -- and many of them were rising political stars, like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tajuddin Ahmed, Shamsul Haq, Syed Nazrul Islam, Oli Ahad --- who did throw down the gauntlet. Other young men, the future Justice Abdur Rahman Chowdhury for instance, were courageous enough to let the all-powerful Mohammad Ali Jinnah know of the ignorance of the non-Bengali leadership about the cultural heritage of the Bengalis. It was to this group that Nadera Begum belonged.

Nothing strange about it, sure. And yet there was something unusual, for Nadera was a young firebrand and a woman at that. In her were combined the revolutionary fervour of Pritilata Waddadar and the intellectualism of Sarojini Naidu. For Nadera Begum, even at that young age, life came in a combination of social realism and intellectual yearning. And then there was the influence of Munier Chowdhury. The result of it all was a socialistic streak in her, a process of thought that swiftly led her into a defence of the rights of the class four employees of Dhaka University. That was, of course, in 1948. Nadera Begum's belief in the dignity of the individual was absolute: men on lower career rungs could not be divested of their dignity. She protested in writing, on public platforms. And she marched in processions where women were not supposed to be seen at all. Nadera Begum did not see things from such a perspective. Hers was a struggle for basic human dignity. She was not waging her battle as a woman. She was only bringing her education into utilization, in the service of the have-nots.

Therein she was a pioneer. Long before so many others in Bangladesh, such as Motia Chowdhury and Amena Begum; before women like Asma Jahangir in Pakistan and Medha Patkar and Brinda Karat in India, Nadera Begum was demonstrating the power of truth that women, despite being women, could wield against the autocracy of the state. She paid a price, of course. She went to prison and stayed there from 1949 to 1951, a very symbol of necessary resistance to a state fast losing touch with citizens. Not for Nadera Begum the easy way out through issuing statements. Not for her a life removed from the din and noise of

politics. She was every inch a political being and yet politics was not what she wished to adopt as a way of life. After gaining freedom from incarceration, she went on with life as it ought to be lived. No braggadocio she, nothing in her of the arrogance which often comes to people who have once made a niche for themselves in the making of history. It was literature she went back to, as a teacher. She shunned the limelight, which is why no one sought her out every time the tumult of her youthful era rounded a year.

Nadera Begum did what history had ordained for her, in the early 1950s. And then she stepped away, into the other role history had sketched for her. She enlightened the young, made them walk the intricate, often tortuous pathways of literature. And she did it in her own fashion, giving her pupils topics to write on without any clues to the research the subjects needed to be underpinned by. There was that twinkle, almost motherly, in her eyes as she looked at a confused, often helpless you. Not to worry, said she. Do it this week and two more over the fortnight after that. Your knees were near collapsing.

Three weeks later, you were beaming. Nadera Begum had read your essays, found them to be somewhat of substance, and given you a straight A for each.

raindrops collide against the window as evening prepares to pass into night. Across the skies, the clouds pass you by. No more than a couple of months ago, Nadera Begum --- political activist, scholar, academic --- passed through the constricting passages of life into eternal silence. Music comes in muted form.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN WAS A STUDENT OF PROF. NADERA BEGUM AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY.

LITERARY NOTES

Bangladesh writing in India



The National Book Trust of India has this year published two books by two Bangladeshi writers. This is for the first time that such a step has been taken. The two writers are litterateurs Selina Hossain and Rashid Haider. Both their books are short story collections, and Selina Hossain's is entitled *Motijaner Meyera o Annanya Golpo* and that of Rashid Haider is entitled, *Brihonnola o Annanya Golpo*.

Each collection has twenty-one stories in it. Agni Roy has compiled and edited the volume by Selina Hossain, while that by Rashid Haider has been edited and compiled by Anjan Shaha. Both the editors have written comprehensive introductions to the books describing the historical perspective of Bangladesh literature, and commenting on the writers' presentation method, their use of language, and their essential characteristics as storytellers. The editors also observed that the two major historical events of Bangladesh—the Language Movement and the Liberation War—seem to have added new dimensions to the writers' compositions. The editors also recognized the fact that the travails, pains and anguish that Bangladesh writers went through, that despite that the pleasure derived by them were not what West Bengal's writers had to cope with.

The National Book Trust has so far supervised the publication of three books by Bangladesh's writers under its Exchange Program. The person to be given credit for this generous undertaking is the Bangla editor of the Trust, Sree Bratin Day. It was let known that the National Book Trust would continue to publish books by Bangladeshi writers in the near future.

It is worth mentioning that all books published by the National Book Trust will be first published in English and eight more languages of India, and then in another sixteen languages, that is, 24 languages in total.

It is to be noted here that the National Book Trust has also published a volume of short stories by Bangladesh writers with the title *Bangladesher Golpo*, edited by Selina Hossain. This volume also contains twenty-one short stories. Why does each collection have twenty-one stories? The reason is simple: showing honour to the 21 February Martyrs' Day or Ekushey February as well as to the International Mother Language Day.

FICTION

Poribanu

SATYEN SEN

Translation: HAROONUZZAMAN

Born in Bikrampur under Munshiganj district in 1907, politician and litterateur Satyen Sen did his M.A. in Bangla literature while he was incarcerated for five years in 1931 for his alleged association with terrorist politics. Indoctrinated in Marxism, he steered the peasant movement and became the leader of Dacca District Krishak Samity and was arrested again in 1949 and imprisoned for four years. Soon after he was released, he joined the daily *Sangbad* as an assistant editor. He was jailed again in 1958 after the promulgation of Martial Law in the country. Released in 1963, he returned to journalism in the same newspaper. From 1965 to 1968, he was put behind bars once again. In 1971, he crossed over to Calcutta during the Liberation War. After the country became Bangladesh, he returned to Dhaka in 1972 and devoted himself to the organizational work of the communist party. Although he made his debut in writing after he crossed fifty, he wrote profusely, mainly novels, for the next two decades. His writings border on the class struggle and the emancipation of the downtrodden. He was the founder of *Udichi*, a left-leaning politico-cultural organization. A bachelor, he died at his sister's home in Shantiniketan. He received the Bangla Academy prize for literature (novels) in 1970. He died in 1981.

I couldn't recognize him at all. It wasn't surprising that I couldn't identify him; rather I would be astonished if I did. With unkempt hair and his face buried under a bushy beard, he was casting a look as if his eyes were bereft of senses. Wearing a *lungi* and dirty vest, he kept his skinny physique covered somehow. Looking at him, anyone would think that he was a mad man. Actually I also thought the same.

It happened during the dark fortnight of the lunar month. Even though it wasn't that late at night, a paralyzing stillness gripped the entire area. It was as if a dreadfully dangerous alarm like a heavy stone was lodged in the mind of the people. After occupying the district town, the Pakistani army was advancing towards the village. News trickling in said that the perpetrators had let loose a reign of terror in far-flung villages, situated at least 10-15 miles away from the river. The blood-curdling stories would send a shudder down the spine. It wouldn't take much time for them to cross the river and reach here! Across the river, the people of this village were spending their days and nights amid tension and fear anticipating havoc the invading troops were preparing to wreak on them. In rotation, the young and strong boys would go round the village to keep the nightly vigil. This was aimed at alerting the villagers, in case the enemy invaded; the guarding

angels wouldn't put up a resistance, whatsoever that might be. Even this service was so essential.

Even though I was reading a book, I wasn't into it. My mind was itinerant. My thoughts were revolving round the looming danger, and right at that moment he almost barged into my room pushing the door wide open. Caught unawares by the suddenness of the incident, I got frightened and asked in a tremulous voice: “Who are you?”

“It's me, sir.”

“Who's that me?”

Although the voice seemed to be known, I couldn't recognize it even after a lot of effort. Finally, I kept looking at him smilingly. Understanding my predicament, however, he came up with a solution.

“It's me, Haroon. Your student. I was teaching at the primary school here. Can't you remember, Sir? You helped me get the job.” He introduced himself.

Now I could recollect it clearly. Haroon did his intermediate from our college. Born in a poor family, he had to struggle a lot to study this far, and then he had to look for a job, putting an end to his studies. Landing a job wasn't that easy! Finally, I got him into this teaching job at the primary school. Working for some years, he had earned some reputation as a teacher. After five-six years, all of a sudden he left the school and vanished into thin air without trace. Since then three-four years had elapsed. Where did he come from after such a long time?

“So you are that Haroon! What happened to you? You look so distraught and broken. Where have you been for such a long time?”

In short, Haroon described his personal history for the previous few years. In the intervening period, he had been teaching in his village school for those years. When the struggle for an independent Bangladesh gathered momentum a couple of months before, he joined the movement chanting the ‘Joy Bangla’ slogan and abandoning his school and family. From then on he had been spending his nomadic life on roads, in villages and the homes of other people.

“That's good. But what happened to your health? Why do you look so frail and emaciated? We are also into it, but we don't look like you – it seems you



Satyen Sen

nobody wants to give us any shelter. Do you know what I am thinking about? At times I think I am surviving somehow by eating the flesh of my own body. This is the reason why my health is like this.” I became speechless. “We are also in the movement”, I felt ashamed at what I had said before. Both of us were in the same movement, but why the results were so different? He was wholeheartedly involved in the struggle; in fact, he left everything and took all possible risks for the movement, while my one was amateurish – safeguarding my family and other interests, I had set sail on favorable wind. This was what I felt intensely while talking to him. It didn't hurt me like this before.

“Have something first, Haroon, and then we'll talk.”

“You are right, Sir. I really need to eat. But this isn't what I have come to you for from such a great distance. Please listen to what I have come here for.”

“No...no. Have your food first. Whatever you have to say, I'll listen to that afterwards. Time isn't running out.” I interjected.

Without giving him any opportunity to prolong the conversation, I went inside. Affronted by my request to arrange food for Haroon, my wife's face suddenly turned gloomy, and I said diffidently: “You can give him my share...”

“That's enough. You don't have to express your consideration like this. You go, and I am sending the food to the outer house.” She said in restrained anger.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

HAROONUZZAMAN TEACHES ENGLISH AT INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY, BANGLADESH