

FICTION

'People like us cannot love. . .'

AINON N.

IN the scheme of life I know I am dispensable. On this there is nothing to analyze or be analyzed. Death separates laughter and tears, the perspective I never lose sight of. This fact rules every act and thought process of mine. It grounds me as a human being. It also makes me a matter-of-fact person, i.e., I hardly find any reason to laugh, the cut-and-dry type. And then one evening the familiar self of mine hesitated.'

Capella was sitting face to face with a gentleman she hardly knew. The divide between them was of an unknown nature, they couldn't be more different as people. He reached out, touching her hand, and said, "In my lifetime I have met you only four times." In a few minutes he had settled in his comfort zone. She liked his frankness. And then she noticed the eyes, laughing, dancing, questioning, challenging. Totally engrossed in that stare she stopped listening, wiping out all that was in her surroundings. Without blinking she said, "Remove your glasses." Midway his sentence stopped, and then he took off the spectacles that kept slipping on his nose. Reaching out, she touched both eyes gently, as if they belonged to someone intimate. As if they needed to be handled with utmost care. As if they existed independent of the owner. "Tell me, what is morality?" She resumed her query to him. Mores and norms that cage desires. Yes, she responded, even innocent ones. "My touching you...makes you uncomfortable?" "No, not at all." He

was surprised, but was bound by the code of conduct. She smiled, knowing very well that confessions get imprisoned between the spontaneity of an unexpected act and a constrained reaction. Throughout her life the restless peregrinations in search of raw emotional truths had led her to look for observables in life with openness, to 'see how deep the place is from which life flows,' looking for fundamentals of honesty that persevere beyond the boundaries of relationships. She had always stood at the periphery of her own life, watching as a 'being that causes itself.' This constant bind to recreate herself eventually took her away from those who mattered. She was yet to find one who would reciprocate at her level to make her come alive, to live. Could he?

"Have you deviated from standards of behavior?" She put forward a generic question, wondering if he would ask her to clarify. Instead, he reflected on relationships. His. With each he was involved intimately. She listened with intent. Were these stories of love or the idea of love wrapped in carnal desire? Or was it the story of feeling desirable, the mystique of authenticating oneself through the other. She asked, "Do you ever feel married?" Without missing a beat he replied, no and yes; laughed out loud and then added his reasons, ah...yes...we are chained by conventions! But there are many ways of and to love. It is not a continuum. In each instance, he quoted, 'that which bound us freed us; and in this freedom we found ourselves bound as closely as possible.' Every relationship is unique and beautiful. My sincerity and commitment are and were true for all.

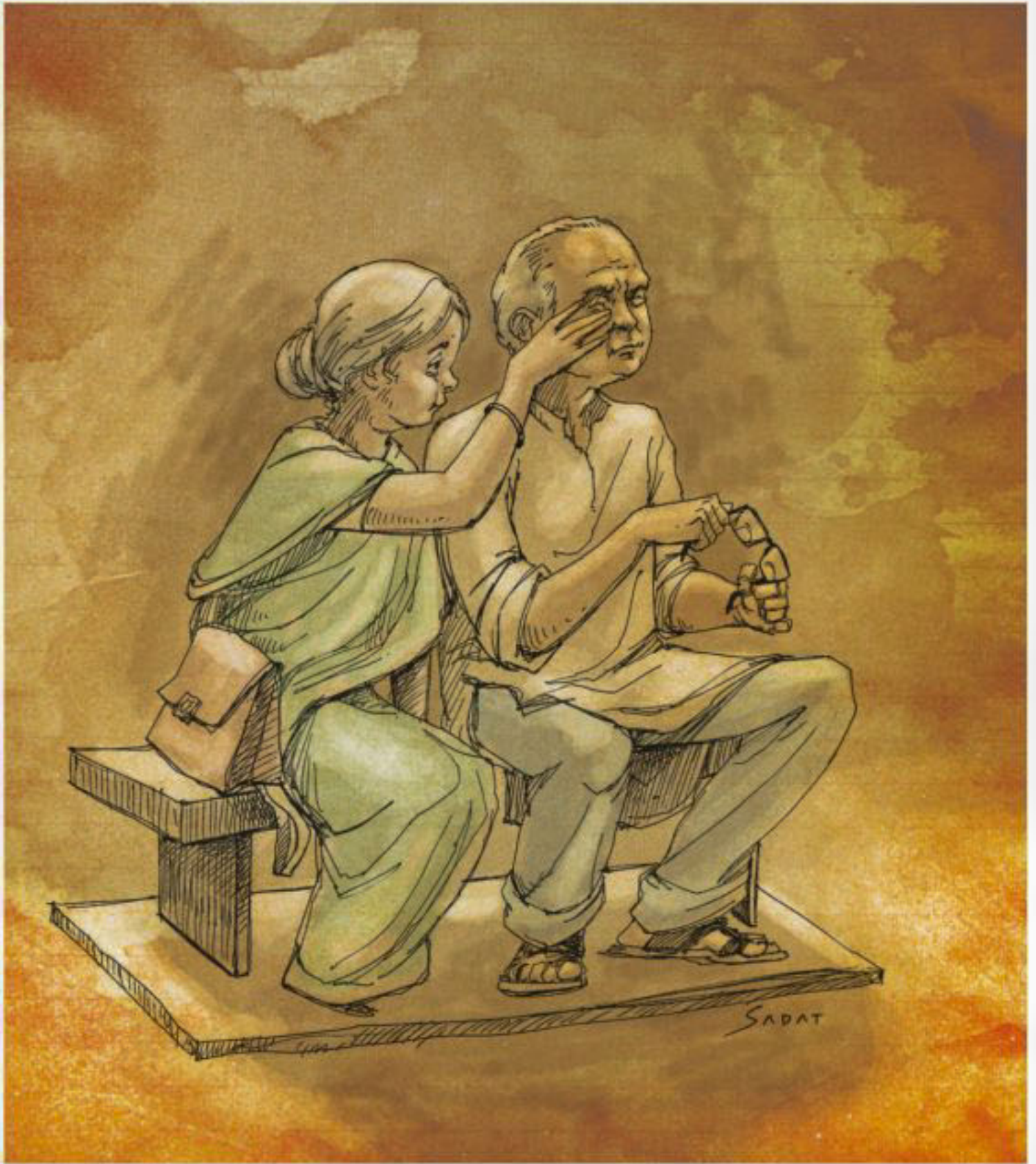
Most of us desire, act, and yet deny confessing or understanding the depth of such love.

To her question, "Is it happiness?" he said, "It is relative." The aesthetics of these often-heard-words played a quiet concert in her mind. In silence she reflected. What is a meaningful end in relationships? Is it the incarnation of self(s) in Desdemona and Othello, Constance Chatterley and Oliver Mellors, Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, so on and so forth, capturing the reflection of self that one paints in thus many portraits? And yet surrender to the monolith of convention is so complete that even the acknowledgment of this profound truth no longer remains a reason. That evening her alienated emotions reached for a conscious choice. Let me conserve life in the realm of just these moments, she thought; but on my terms. She said, "We are not friends, but will you be one?" Yes, he replied. Ah...the seeker of life. The quiet of her mind ventured --- but I seek nothing and yet so much more.

That evening she confronted her own accepted order of things. Indeed, the liaison between knowledge and experiential awareness as elements of life is incomplete one without the other. She left with a sense of disquiet...with a lingering thought on Nirvana, *Through my body and soul ... I learned to love the world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary vision of perfection, but to leave it as it is...*

And then she said, to no one in particular, "But people like us cannot love!"

AINON N IS AN ACADEMIC AND WRITER.



CELEBRATIONS

Nazrul: The ever-shining beacon

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK

IT is difficult to imagine a time when Kazi Nazrul Islam could have been locked away in a world of anonymity. Yet it is true that when he became involved in the anti-British movement, our National Poet who had given his heart and soul to a nation, came very close to such a situation.

Despite his rising popularity, the Gramophone Company of India was ready to turn down the chance to record any of his songs once his political activities came to light. However, when Nazrul's first record, a compilation rendered by reputed artiste Harendra Dutt, was sold out, he irrevocably stamped his presence on the cultural scene. The Gramophone Company could no longer overlook the mass hype, and he was soon asked to record songs for them.

The job offer was a heaven-sent opportunity. The association with the company marked an astonishing period of creativity. He also recorded for Senola, Pioneer, Regal and Twin.

The Gramophone Company better known as HMV provided a platform for talented lyrists, composers, trainers and singers. Once Nazrul joined the HMV as the chief trainer, it gave him the opportunity to work with a talented group of musicians of that period (1928-1932). It also provided an income he could use to continue the treatment of his son Bulbul, something that the meagre royalty from books could never provide.

Though best known as the "Rebel Poet", Nazrul's ghazals were as masterful as they were works of delicate composition. In 1928, for the first time two of Nazrul's finest ghazals were recorded. Legendary singer Angur Bala sang "Eto jol o kajal chokhey" and "Bhuli kemoney". The songs proved to be an instant success and brought Nazrul further into limelight. But his musical life truly flourished in the 1930's.



The poet with friends

This was also the time of Talkies. Audiences were demanding songs between sequences in movies. Until then Bengali poets were composing songs for a very narrow segment of the audience. Now the record companies had to produce records for the masses. Nazrul took deep interest and worked tirelessly in directing and composing music for theatre and movies.

Romanticism was the dominant theme of this new musical trend. Nazrul directed the music in the film ver-

sion of Tagore's famous novel "Gora". He had also directed music for several classic films like "Dhrubo", "Patalpuri", "Shapurey", "Bidyapati", "Nandini", "Chourangi", "Dikshul", "Chattagram Astragar Lunthan" and "Shri Shri Tarakeshwar". Apart from composing an astounding 18 songs for Dhrubo, Nazrul also appeared in the role of "Narad" in the film.

Nazrul's yearning to be both original and creative was legendary. For one particular film, "Patalpuri", based on the

life of coal miners, Nazrul travelled all the way to Raniganj, his ancestral home, to get a better understanding of the theme and tunes atypical to the region. He lived with the local Santals for a week and returned with some Santal tunes on which he composed several songs in "Jhumur" form.

Nazrul also conducted radio programmes on All India Radio, Kolkata titled Haramoni, Nabarag Malika and Geeti Bichitra. In Haramoni, Nazrul presented songs based on classical melodies, which were fast fading out. In the programme Nabarag Malika, Nazrul is said to have developed 17 new ragas such as Nirjhorini, Udasi Bhairab, Arunranjani, Shiv Sharaswati, Asha Bhairavi, Benukuntala and more. He also created 6 new taals or rhythms. Renowned musician Jagat Ghatak who worked closely with Nazrul wrote on how Nazrul painstakingly worked on the new ragas well into the wee hours. Nazrul is said to have conducted 80 such programmes.

When Nazrul came to Dhaka to attend the first anniversary of the radio station in 1940, he conducted a programme titled Pubali. Among other artistes, Shuprobha Sarkar accompanied him. Speaking on Nazrul's spontaneity, Shuprobha said, "At Goalondo, we were waiting on the deck, when we saw a few women leap from one boat to another. I asked, 'Aren't they afraid?' To which Kazida (Nazrul) replied, 'They are from East Bengal, they are fearless.' While we were talking, a young bride looked at us for a few moments. Kazida instantly wrote a song and composed a beautiful tune -- 'Purobo desher puro nari'."

This was classic Nazrul -- impulsive, inspired and tirelessly creative. It truly is difficult to visualise the world of our culture without Nazrul giving it such a sparkle.

SADYA AFREEN MALLICK, REPUTED NAZRUL EXPONENT, IS EDITOR, ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT, THE DAILY STAR

REMEMBRANCE

Sydur Rahman's secular spirit

HASAN TARIQUE CHOWDHURY

THE 26th death anniversary of eminent philosopher and educationist Professor Sydur Rahaman was observed on 28 August. He was an uncompromising voice for secular thought. He strongly opposed all types of religious extremism and promoted the ideals of modern science and logic during the tough Pakistani days. He was among the vanguard that showed the way to freedom of thought in the difficult, communalism-driven times of Pakistan in our part of the world. He spent the golden period of his life struggling with his sharp pen to establish secular and progressive ideas in this country as well as in neighboring countries of this region.

Born in an ordinary peasant family of Rasullahbad, a village in the interior of Brahmanbaria district, on 15 May 1909, Sydur Rahman attained excellent positions of merit in every sphere of his educational career. In 1931 and 1932 he passed BA (Hons) and MA with first class in philosophy from Dhaka University.

In his vibrant professional life he served as a professor at Dhaka College, Eden College, Sylhet MC College, Chittagong College and Jagannath College. He was also professor of philosophy at Dhaka University. As an educationist and social worker he closely observed the Second World War, the famine of 1943, the tragic communal riots of Kolkata, creation of Pakistan, 1952 language movement and the emergence of independent Bangladesh following a great liberation war. These historical events strongly influenced his psychology and thinking and drove him towards secularism and socialism. He recited the holy Quran in his childhood and wrote an extraordinary book on Islamic philosophy. His tremendous contributions to the Islamic Foundation in the country has been remarkable. Even so, he has been criticised as an 'atheist' and 'communist' by some critics for nurturing progressive ideas.

At present, secularism has practically become a farcical phenomenon in national politics, with religious extremism rearing its head all over the place. If Professor Sydur Rahman were alive today, he would again write and speak against this distortion of the spirit of our great Liberation War of 1971. As an activist in building a secular Bangladesh in pre-

1971 times, he was harassed by the Pakistani government. He was even forced to resign from the position of principal of Jagannath College due to political differences with the despotic East Pakistan governor Monem Khan. In Bangladesh, religious extremism and fundamentalism have emerged as big dangers for the nation. The serial bomb blasts of 17 August 2005 and other instances of sabotage in recent times have exposed the cruel and ugly face of religious extremism. At such time we feel more the need of people like Prof Sydur Rahman even more, for men like Sydur Rahman were relentless in their campaign against the forces of darkness.

Professor Sydur Rahman's writings always included the concept of modern science and logic. His famous book, 'An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy', is widely known to society. Being a thoroughly modern man, he felt pain about the backwardness of our society and especially in relation to the Muslim community. He has written thus, "In many cases Muslims have not changed their 'old value' following, have not adopted modern science and the inherent query of philosophy, have not awakened the questions asleep deep in the heart. So they become blind, irrational and reactionary. In many countries of the world they are under the spell of superstition, poverty, idleness, anti-development and undemocratic conditions. For this reason they often create for themselves a nation without hope." He adds, "We should not push our society a thousand years back." His remarks have turned out to be justified. And when religious extremism is threatening the existence of our civilisation in a renewed way, his writings could be more relevant as we try to combat this danger.

Professor Sydur Rahman was in constant touch with many of our national leaders. They are Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Comrade Moni Singh and Professor Muzaffar Ahmed. They all respected him for his intelligence.

Twenty six years after his passing, we deeply feel his absence, especially at this point of time. We believe his memory will be our inspiration, now and always.

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NOSTALGIA

Writing and reading letters

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

TIME was when we used to write letters. It was an era when people made contact with one another, and over long distances, through letters. Something of the intensely personal came with those letters, something of communication between one heart and another. The beauty about letters was that the soul came with it. Feelings embedded in the heart simply poured forth and once they all came to be encapsulated in letters, we felt something of a burden lifting from us.

Those days, of course, are now memory. No matter how much of a positive view you may hold about technological development, about the revolutionary progress brought about by the coming of the internet, there is the unassailable truth that the day we stopped writing letters and switched our attention to e-mails and then this little strangeness called sms, the warmth went out of us somewhat. And with that went away huge slices of intellect. For you cannot but admit that writing letters was always an intellectual exercise, even if it came in desultory fashion. Fathers wrote to their children about the health conditions of mothers in manner that made entire familiar scenes of home come alive. Sons sent off missives to parents, proffering advice on their health and seeking their comments on plans they on their own were making about the future. Daughters went off to distant villages, or small towns, to be part of in-laws' families and from there wrote to their mothers about themselves, about the thousand and one ways they missed home.

When you speak of letters, you realise how much of a role the epistolary has played in the shaping of history. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote an immensity of letters to his young daughter Indira, from prison and outside. Rabindranath Tagore spent an entire lifetime writing letters to other great men and women of his time. Not many years ago, a reputed Indian journal published a series of letters that Buddhadev Bose and his child wrote to each other. There have been instances of writers, men and women, who have written to one another and eventually fallen in love with one another, with results that could only benefit the world. Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin wrote copiously to each other and bared their innermost desires. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett discussed on poetry and then discovered, almost to their surprise, that they had become lovers.

In the days when letter writing was an integral part of life, grandfathers living in little villages in Bengal cheerfully showed off the missives their school-going grandchildren had sent them from faraway lands. In the medieval era, as also later eras, monarchs wrote to other mon-

archs in various manifestations of temperament. Some demanded tribute, some pressed for military aid against their enemies and some proposed the marriage of their children with those of the royalty they were writing to. In the days when the movement for Indian independence began to gather pace, a flurry of letters was observed defining the situation and delineating the parameters of the negotiations that would take place on the decolonisation of the subcontinent. In early 1969, Ayub Khan sent out letters to the opposition Democratic Action Committee inviting its leading lights to a round table conference in Rawalpindi. In the course of the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle maintained necessary contact with one another through dispatching letters to one another. In the year 44 BC, as the conspiracy to eliminate Julius Caesar gained in substance, it was decided that anonymous letters would be pushed through the gates of Brutus' home as a way of convincing him that the future of Rome was in his hands and that he was expected to lead the uprising against the dictator. In 1958, days after being appointed minister by President Iskandar Mirza, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto wrote an ingratiating response to him, to tell him that history would record him as a great man, that indeed it would say that he was greater than Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

In whatever way you look at it, you cannot but admit that there was a profusion of rich sentiments that came with writing letters. Letters revealed minds at work, for they threw up images of the people behind them. In letters came a grave attention to the subject at hand, with little or no room for distraction or pointless conversation. Letters have always been symbolic of enlightenment, of a development and enhancement of thoughts in the individual. In the old days, the very young were taught the varied ways of letter writing --- personal letters, letters to newspapers and letters in response to job-related advertisements. And then there were the sad moments of life, when children inhabiting foreign lands or distant shores became recipients of letters informing them of the demise of a parent back home in the ancient ancestral village. Those letters took an hour to be written. It took weeks, sometimes months, for them to reach their destinations.

In 1964, the Labour Party won the elections in Britain and Harold Wilson took office as prime minister. On Robben Island, the imprisoned Nelson Mandela would know about it only in 1980, long after Wilson had come and gone. It was Margaret Thatcher's generation running the show.